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We must act now to create a brighter future for Buffalo

By John B. Simpson
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS
March 21, 2010, 6:40 AM /

Western New York, and indeed all of New York State, has been hit hard by the global economic crisis. Industries that were once our mainstay, like steel making and grain processing, are gone, and I don't expect to see them come back. Our way forward does not lie with a resurgence of the industries that brought us prosperity in the 20th century. Our future lies with the development of new opportunities based on research and innovation.

The University at Buffalo has a key role to play in building a better future for our region. As the Brookings Institution has observed, research universities like UB are "anchor tenants" that play a vital role in their host city's well-being. The experiences of cities that are anchored by strong research universities, like Seattle and Pittsburgh, demonstrate that the economic success of a region is in direct proportion to the strength of its anchor tenant.

UB is a very good university, but we have not yet achieved our vast potential. We have a stellar faculty, an increasingly talented student body, a dedicated staff, a supportive community and a loyal alumni base. And we have created a long-range plan, UB 2020, that will allow us to leverage these many strengths to gain our rightful place among the nation's top public research universities.

When that happens, Buffalo and the entire region will share in the benefits. UB's growth will fuel more jobs at all levels. Our faculty's research will generate more spin-off companies and help existing businesses grow and prosper. And the opportunities we create will keep more of our young people here in Western New York.

UB is Buffalo's anchor tenant, and UB 2020 offers hope to our region. That's why our plan enjoys a broad base of support from every sector of the community. Business, labor, elected officials, faith-based organizations and civic groups have all endorsed UB 2020. These groups strongly support the reforms needed from Albany that will help us achieve our plan. I am very grateful for that support.

UB 2020 is neither a magical plan nor a panacea for all of what ails Western New York. But it is realistic and thoughtful, and it is already producing early gains. But its ultimate success is not assured.

Accomplishing UB 2020 will require hard work by all of us. It also will require funding, which must come from the state, as well as from money to be earned by the university. At present, we are limited on both of those fronts. The state has deeply cut UB's funding, and it continues to pursue outdated policies that hamper our ability to enhance our revenues. As long as Albany continues these practices, the brighter future we envision for Buffalo is at risk.

Albany has slashed UB's funding by \$40 million since 2008, and we expect another reduction this year of some \$16 million. In 2009 it enacted a steep tuition hike on our students, then kept 80 percent of the resulting income, depriving the university and our students of another \$24.8 million. These cuts are real,

and painful. And while the goals of UB 2020 have not changed, the path toward securing our strategic goals is now far steeper and much harder.

If Albany continues to over-regulate the SUNY and CUNY campuses while slashing our budgets, it will simply be impossible for us to thrive as a research university, and thus to drive the transformation of New York's economy. Here in Buffalo, this means failing to achieve UB 2020. We cannot let this happen. We need changes in Albany, and we need them now.

The solution lies in a package of common-sense reforms now under consideration in the Legislature as the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act (PHEEIA). These changes will relieve our campuses from outdated regulations imposed by Albany, and empower us to generate the resources we need to transform our regional economy and provide students with a high-quality education.

SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher and other forward-thinking leaders are advocating for this bill, which will grant more flexibility to all SUNY and CUNY campuses and do away with the sudden tuition increases of the past that have dealt severe setbacks to students and parents.

With sufficient resources, UB will be able to educate more students, and more importantly, to offer each student a truly excellent education. We will be able to provide more financial aid for needy students, thereby preserving affordability. Yet merely providing affordable access to higher education is not good enough. Our children deserve access to the best public education we can give them. In my view, access without excellence represents a very ugly form of discrimination.

It is time to do away with New York's outdated practice of keeping SUNY and CUNY tuitions artificially low during economically stable periods, and then hiking them dramatically when things turn bad and keeping the money in Albany to offset the state's budget deficits. This practice, which I call "tuition roulette," is unfair to parents and students, and does nothing to enhance academic quality. It must be replaced with a rational, predictable tuition policy that recognizes the higher costs of providing a research-university education, and leaves tuition dollars on the campuses, where they can be invested to improve academic quality and enhance financial aid.

My UB colleagues and I join our students and their parents in calling for such a tuition policy, along with the other reforms in PHEEIA. These changes will cost the taxpayers nothing, and they will benefit virtually every member of our community and our university, and allow UB to have an even greater impact in Buffalo and beyond.

Our friends in the Western New York legislative delegation are solidly behind this proposal, and the entire community needs to back their efforts to steer these reforms through Albany. The consequences of business-as-usual will be devastating.

We have before us one of those rare opportunities to take bold, decisive actions that will shape the future for our children and grandchildren. Let's work together to see that PHEEIA is enacted.

John B. Simpson is the president of UB.

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