

The Senate's SUNY power play

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Welcome to Higher Education in New York 101. Requirements: None; raw political instincts recommended. Participants will learn how to manipulate an \$11 billion state university system for maximum political gain.

That's how we'd imagine a course synopsis might read if someone tried to explain how the state Legislature approaches its oversight of the State University of New York.



Case in point: UB 2020, a bill to give SUNY Buffalo more autonomy in tuition and other matters. It passed the Senate on Wednesday.

It's not a bad bill in principle. It would give SUNY Buffalo limited freedom to raise tuition without legislative approval. That would allow a more rational approach than the Legislature's practice of starving SUNY for years and then hitting students with a massive tuition hike. Even students say regular increases make more sense.

Some of the money from tuition increases would be used for financial aid programs to help students with low and modest incomes.

The bill would further let SUNY Buffalo keep the money it generates from tuition, fees and other sources, and prohibit the state from using the extra revenue as an excuse to cut aid to it. The school could also enter into public-private partnerships and sell or lease its property without micromanagement by the Legislature.

The entirely laudable goal is a well-funded university that can better serve not only as an educational institution but as an economic engine in a long-struggling area of the state.

The legislation does have flaws. The allowable tuition hikes -- up to \$375 a semester for undergraduates and up to 15 percent a year for students in professional programs -- could allow tuition to quickly get out of hand. SUNY's trustees, though, would hold the final decision.

The real problem with UB 2020 is that it so conspicuously applies to only one campus in the vast SUNY system. Yes, the bill is described as a pilot program. But why not try giving all of SUNY more autonomy, as Chancellor Nancy Zimpher has suggested?

The answer undoubtedly lies at least partly in the Senate itself, where power has shifted from Republicans to Democrats and back to Republicans in the last two elections. The largely

Republican delegation from Western New York fought vigorously for this bill, to be sure, but it's hard not to notice that some of the districts in that part of the state have seen unusually competitive elections lately. Sponsor Mark Grisanti narrowly beat a Democrat last year. If nothing else, this bill gives lawmakers something to brag about back home.

Here are the final exam questions for the course, then:

If this is such a good idea for Buffalo, why isn't it a good idea for Albany? Or Binghamton, Stony Brook and every campus?

Can lawmakers only see the value of an empowered SUNY when it's in their political interests?

And, given that this bill has yet to pass the Assembly, was SUNY Buffalo just a prop in a political show?

THE ISSUE:

A bill to give one university more autonomy passes the state Senate.

THE STAKES:

The rest of the state wonders when its turn will come.

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