

THE STATE UNIVERSITY *of* NEW YORK



Chancellor, John R. Ryan

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The Future of SUNY

As our SUNY campuses begin the fall semester, I want to commend all of our faculty, staff, and stakeholders for their superb work last year – work that is key to achieving our primary goal of providing each student with the highest possible quality education, one that is affordable, accessible and attainable.

SUNY is one of the best higher education systems in the country and, as we move forward, we must focus on keeping the “public” in public higher education. That means staying affordable and accessible to all of New York’s students. And at the same time, it is imperative that we continue to enhance the quality of a SUNY education and provide a holistic process that enables high levels of achievement for all our students.

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This is the 11th time I have had the privilege of serving in a leadership position. Many were during my three decades in the United States Navy, then as the president of three colleges, and now as SUNY chancellor. Each new position has been accompanied by its own challenges and opportunities. In public higher education across the nation, one of the greatest challenges we face is maintaining a sufficient level of full time faculty. With our strong SUNY budget now enacted by our trustees, I am pleased that SUNY is able to move toward a major goal: hiring an additional 300-plus new full time faculty.

While part-time faculty perform important service to SUNY, it is our full time faculty who expand our research portfolio, participate in university governance, and shape the culture

of our campuses through their commitment to teaching and learning.

SUNY’s 31,000 faculty are already among the most efficient and productive in the nation, but we do not have enough of them. Moreover, less than 62 percent of our State-operated campus faculty are full time, whereas a decade ago, 74 percent were full time. Our part-time faculty do a wonderful job and the use of part-time faculty to meet particular institutional teaching needs is a sound fiscal strategy.

However, when our FT/PT faculty ratio becomes skewed, it does our students a disservice by failing to provide them the highest quality classroom experience and exposure to, and mentoring by the seasoned professors they deserve. We can do better – and we will, starting this year.

Our SUNY students are an incredibly talented and diverse group. Approximately 80 percent of SUNY students receive some form of financial assistance, whether they are receiving aid from Pell Grants or the State’s Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), or are in a work study program. Combined with our low tuition and fees, these programs make SUNY both affordable and accessible.

However, as higher education costs continue to rise and state budgets across the nation are increasingly strained, the need to implement policies that guarantee affordability and accessibility is becoming even more critical. Last year, SUNY Trustees proposed a rational tuition plan, which would prevent students and families from experiencing substantial, unexpected tuition increases as they have in recent years. This unfortunate practice is what I call “tuition roulette.”

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The Future of SUNY (continued)

A rational tuition plan would allow students and parents to plan, not just for one year, but for the length of their degree program, so that from the moment they enroll, our students would know precisely what their tuition bills would be for their entire degree program. No sudden hikes; no financial crises – just sound policy and a commitment to our students that would allow them to focus on their studies instead of worrying about future tuition rates. We will continue to pursue the adoption of a rational tuition plan with the governor and state legislature, and look forward to seeing it enacted.

For a deeper and more long-term view of public higher education, I believe our state leaders need an impartial, bi-partisan, thorough analysis of SUNY – what SUNY is, what it's accomplishing and what we can and must do better.

After the fall elections, I will urge our state leaders to establish a Blue Ribbon commission that would be made up of a cross-section of stakeholders: business leaders, experienced educators and administrative leaders from New York and comparable states, as well as both a student representative and an international higher education official. The commission would take a comprehensive look at what works best in higher education, not just in New York State, but throughout the country and internationally. After it conducts broad research on SUNY and best practices throughout higher education, the commission would make a series of recommendations regarding SUNY to the governor, the legislature, and SUNY Trustees. These recommendations could then serve as a blueprint for the future of the State University.

One of the areas where SUNY's role is critical throughout New York State is in economic development. In each and every community

where a SUNY campus exists, we are an essential economic engine that drives local economies and the State economy as a whole. Whether it's through the public-private partnerships at our Centers of Excellence; the cutting-edge research our professors are conducting throughout the system; workforce development at any of our institutions, but particularly at any of our 30 community colleges; or simply through active support in town-gown relations, SUNY is there, making a difference. Our goal is to be even more impactful in the coming years.

Going forward, we need to continue to fuel economic development by producing graduates who meet the State's growing workforce needs in fields like healthcare, computer technology, engineering and education. We can also focus more of our campus research and community involvement on supporting regional economic priorities and challenges. Our talented SUNY professionals are indeed a great investment, one that will continue to provide solutions for New York State.

With our first steps toward making both SUNY and each institution exceptional now underway, with the help of our Trustees' adoption of the 2006-07 financial plan and the addition of much-needed full-time faculty, we are off to a great start. I look forward to building on this progress with faculty, staff and stakeholders over the coming years as we join together to make SUNY the nation's premier public higher education system.

John R. Ryan
Chancellor
The State University of New York

This is the first in a series of columns that will be submitted regularly by SUNY Chancellor John R. Ryan, for your information.