

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
SPRING PLENARY APRIL 2011
FREDONIA, NY

University life has a rhythm and pace all its own, with semester (or quarters) beginning, proceeding, ending, to be followed by another. So too the annual political calendar; if its spring, it must be budget season. The following report is very much in line with the pattern we have adopted.

1. Budget and Related Issues.

When last we met in Binghamton, we had little real budget news, and what we did have was not good. After the Governor's budget message of February 1, it got a good deal worse. In broadest terms, he proposed whacking SUNY's operating budget support another 10%, which amounted to \$88 million. By itself, that amount several years ago would have been little more than a major inconvenience. However, coming after more than \$630 million in reductions over the preceding 3 years, it posed a major problem for our state-operated campuses, greater for some than others. And, the problem was compounded by the Governor's surprise recommendation that the entire state subsidy to SUNY's hospitals (\$130 million) be eliminated. If this cut were sustained by the legislature, SUNY would have been faced with an incredibly difficult – and largely unfair – choice: either distribute a large portion of the cut across the system, weakening each campus's ability to meet the needs of students, or let the hospitals go on their own, knowing that this would mean that two of them would be bankrupt in a matter of months. SUNY's medical schools, one of the University's founding sectors in 1948, would follow in their wake. And the Governor delivered another blow with this assertion that these cuts did not justify a tuition increase in this year.

SUNY's strategy concentrated on two issues: restoration of hospital funds and the enactment of a five-year "rational tuition plan," modeled in some ways like the five-year capital budget plans. The mantra for what the administration was that such a plan would be "fair, predictable and responsible," with small, predictable annual increments. Equally important, the money would be kept by SUNY and used for the education of students, not "swept" like 60% of the last increase of \$650 for roads, prisons, pensions, or other state needs. And finally, the state would commit itself to some level of "maintenance of effort," which means the state would establish a level of support for public higher education in New York and maintain that level in the future, including increases in mandatory costs.

In March the Faculty Senate Executive Committee passed a budget resolution that asked for restorations and endorsed a rational fiscal plan just before the Board of Trustees adopted a similar (but very differently worded) resolution. In addition, eight campus governance bodies adopted either similar resolutions or resolutions that directly supported our resolution.

All this was to little avail. As we now know, if the Governor's budget was a "worst case scenario," the final budget was not all that much better. The hospitals received \$60 million more than the Governor proposed and gained another \$27 million by amortizing pay increases. In addition, the community colleges had a portion of their cut rescinded, but there was no restoration for SUNY's core operating budget. The \$88 million cut stood. And there was no tuition in the budget, a tactical move on the Governor's part, separating what Albany politicians believe to be a viral issue – higher tuition – from the rest of the budget.

What remains at this point is a promise to deal with tuition in the post budget period, and the Governor's expressed interest in exploring SUNY's proposed rational tuition plan. But, what the

Governor is organizing, at least publically, is a “summit” that would examine UB 2020. How this will play out is anybody’s guess, but I am certain, and I believe most of us are certain, that UB 2020 is no adequate solution to the system’s fiscal problems, which on several campuses may well be a crisis.

Given the current state of affairs, I urge us to revisit the Executive Committee’s budget resolution in light of the adopted budget, revise it and adopt it. By taking this step we will be sending an unequivocal reminder to the Governor and the members of the Legislature that tuition remains to be dealt with in a way that offers both short and near term relief to their state university.

If they fail to act, we can expect more “program deactivations.” Remember, program deactivations are a normal part of college and university life. Nowhere is it written that once a program has been approved, it will be offered in perpetuity. Yet, program evaluation involves judgments that should be first, foremost and fundamentally curricular in nature, even though they are almost always framed within a budgetary context.

Finding a satisfactory path for shared governance to travel through this thicket is difficult at best, fraught with innumerable opportunities for misunderstanding and ill-will. Yet, if a campus community is to maintain its own sense of itself as a humane, collegial collection of professionals dedicated to the education of the next generation of productive citizens, we all must do our very best.

2. SUNY’s Strategic Planning Process.

The implementation phase of the Strategic Planning process is concluding its first major milestone, the reports of the thirteen innovation and transformation teams. These reports will document the progress the six Innovation Teams have made toward identifying the specific metrics which will be used to chart our success over the next several years. In addition, the seven Transformation teams will present their ideas about the goals they have identified for each area, as well as the means by which we will be working toward revising the ways in which SUNY conducts much of its internal operations. In early May, the SUNY Report Card, with the specific metrics for each of the six big ideas, will be unveiled by Chancellor, basically using 2008-09 data as our baseline, which will be followed in a late September conference, “Universities as Economic Drivers: Measuring Impact.”

Among the Transformation teams is one focused on Shared Governance that I co-chair with Prof. Tina Good, the President of FCCC. Our team has been divided into two sub committees, the first dedicated to developing two surveys that will be distributed during this upcoming year, one to evaluate shared governance across the system and the other to gauge constituent satisfaction. The second group, chaired by Prof. Sharon Cramer (the former chair of our Governance Committee), will be crafting a toolkit designed to assist campuses in developing more effective governance mechanisms.

3. Other Noteworthy Items.

- The Graduate Committee organized “Research that Matters,” an extraordinary exhibition in the Legislative Office Building on March 8 of almost eighty graduate students’ research from SUNY and CUNY. The students ranged from Master’s to post-docs and their work represented a wide variety of disciplines, from the Natural Sciences to the Fine Arts. Kudos to Ed Feldman and every member of the Committee.
- The Executive Committees of the FCCC and the UFS met on March 24 for a two-hour exchange of views. We found much in common, including our interest in the new SUNY information system

(SIRIS) and our concern about the current attacks on public education on all levels. We have agreed to begin joint planning on a conference on the importance of the collegiate experience.

- The new SUNY Student Mobility website (<http://www.suny.edu/student/transfer.cfm>) was showcased at the March Board of Trustees meeting. Each of the Trustees accessed the site on a laptop, aided by an incredibly enthusiastic student who had transferred from one SUNY campus to another.

Some Concluding Notions.

As I have indicated in other communications, we now face a public relations issue of enormous complexity, a Gordian knot with distinct strands that can be identified as:

- A disdain for all things “public”, (as in public welfare, public health, public restrooms);
- A disguised ideological attack on those who have given their lives to the accumulation and transmission of knowledge;
- A parallel disregard for education in general, and public education in particular;
- A deep economic crisis, the answer to which is assumed to be more free market solutions; and
- A dismissal for the historic need for and role of unions in contemporary life.

In short, we have clearly been identified as the enemy by a significant number of our fellow citizens; we are the public part of the private – public dichotomy, the educated (or mis-educated) elite, the organized in what is ideally thought to be an unorganized society. These opponents have voices, they often have position, and many either have wealth or access to it. Despite this, we cannot allow their vision of an American future in which all things public are anathema to go unchallenged.

So, we must engage them, with integrity, with consideration, with tolerance, and most of all, with our stock in trade, ideas. And, in this debate, we will call upon our public traditions, the remarkable record of American public institutions, and the record of American public colleges and universities that have become the envy of the world.

Respectfully submitted,
Kenneth P. O’Brien