

New York state and city universities face tuition hikes, cutbacks

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As public university students in New York State begin the spring semester, they face major attacks on their educational prospects, both economic and academic.

New York State's budget crisis is having growing impacts on its two public university systems—the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY). These are, respectively, the largest and third largest public university systems in the country and have, in the past, provided opportunities for large numbers of working class youth to obtain quality higher educations. However, both are now facing tuition increases, reductions in financial aid, loss of faculty, and even the cutting of entire departments and programs.

New York's new Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, in his state of the state address, and the SUNY chancellor, Nancy Zimpher, in her state of SUNY address, both mouthed the slogan that the public university system can be an “economic engine” to help turn around the state's economy and make it “more competitive.” In order to achieve these purported goals, Cuomo and Zimpher are undertaking a rapid transformation of the university system into a grossly hierarchical institution in which a small elite is put at the service of business interests, while the majority of students and faculty are relegated to second-class status.

SUNY comprises 64 campuses, more than 468,000 students and a workforce of 88,000. The proportion of SUNY's overall budget—currently \$10 billion—coming from the state government has been drastically reduced in recent years. Over the last three years alone, public funding has been cut by \$1.1 billion, roughly one third. State support for each full-time equivalent student has diminished by 29 percent from 1990 to 2009. Consequently, student tuition and other sources of income now constitute the majority of the revenue for this supposedly public institution. In 1990, state aid accounted for 43 percent of all funds, but now constitutes only 15 percent. Furthermore, 90 percent of the proceeds from recent tuition increases have been appropriated by the state legislature for use in other areas of the state budget.

In her address, Zimpher stated, “Less public investment, more demands and rapidly shifting economic sands require us to be increasingly agile.” This “agility” consists of a radical

restructuring of the academic program offered at the SUNY campuses. The plan includes the reduction or elimination of courses not deemed economically viable and tailoring of offerings to suit the needs of private firms, so-called public-private partnerships. This is in line with Cuomo's call for the university to undertake “marketable research.” Zimpher wants to “advance the interests of the private sector while generating revenue and creating jobs.”

Another element of the chancellor's plan is the introduction of competition between schools for the dwindling amount of state aid, which would be based on an assessment of supposed “achievement” rather than on enrollment. This would inevitably lead to a widening disparity in resources between campuses and the development of a tiered system, with a small elite and lower-quality, under-resourced schools for the large majority of the student body.

In addition to the expectation of revenue from business-oriented research, Zimpher placed heavy emphasis on fund-raising from alumni, on the order of billions of dollars. Under current economic conditions and given that SUNY graduates tend to earn less than those from elite private universities, which rely heavily on alumni donations, the expectation that substantial amounts will be raised from this source may most charitably be characterized as wishful thinking and more honestly as intentional deception.

According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, public universities across the country are building up their fund-raising budgets and staff while at the same time cutting their academic programs.

Finally, Zimpher called for the achievement of efficiencies in “back office” operations that support the 64-campus system. Inevitably, this will result in staff layoffs and a reduction in student services.

The transformation of SUNY is underway and will accelerate dramatically as Cuomo's plans for radical budget-cutting are implemented. Already, a number of campuses have announced academic cuts in keeping with the aim of tailoring their programs to focus on the needs of business.

At SUNY Albany, one of the principal campuses of the state system, government funding has been cut by \$33.5 million over the last two years. One consequence is the elimination of

degree-granting programs in Russian, French, Italian, theater and classics, which was announced last fall, affecting 2,459 students.

In November, SUNY Geneseo announced that due to a \$7.2 million budget deficit, it would eliminate degree programs in communicative disorders and sciences, computer science, and studio art. The university president, Christopher Dahl, stated that this action was taken “because of state budget cuts—part of a broader plan to reallocate resources in response to rapidly diminishing fiscal support. The inescapable reality is that actions have consequences, and I could no longer avert the impact of the state’s severe and repeated budget cuts to SUNY.” He went on to state that, “Never before have I seen a budget situation so precarious. The SUNY budget cuts pose dangerous risks with real and lasting consequences, not just for SUNY, but for the state’s economy.”

Many other campuses have announced similar cuts.

Last year, former Governor Paterson proposed the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act, which was strongly supported by Zimpher. While it did not make it through the legislature, its main components are still being promoted by both Cuomo and the SUNY administration. A key element of this plan is to remove control over tuition from the legislature, while at the same time giving individual SUNY and CUNY campuses flexibility in setting tuition rates. Although this would supposedly eliminate the legislature’s outrageous practice of “sweeping” money from students’ tuition payments for use in areas of the state budget unrelated to higher education, tuition “flexibility” for the individual schools would provide an excuse to reduce state aid even further and exacerbate competition between schools for the little that remains.

Following the administration’s lead, the SUNY Student Assembly has expressed support for a proposed “rational tuition policy,” which would entail individually smaller, but more frequent tuition increases of up to 5.5 percent, which is 1.5 times the 20-year average of the Higher Education Price Index. According to the Albany *Times Union*, “That formula could allow dramatic hikes that far outstrip inflation. Had this policy been in effect since 1995, tuition today could be almost \$7,200 at most SUNY and CUNY schools and more than \$11,500 at select ones, compared with the current \$4,970.”

The Student Assembly also is calling for an increase in the state-funded Tuition Assistance Plan (TAP) to cover these increases, an unlikely prospect given the state’s huge budget deficit. The legislature actually decreased TAP awards by \$75. In effect, the Student Assembly is accepting as inevitable further increases in tuition, which is rapidly becoming unaffordable for a substantial layer of students. Other student and faculty groups, including the CUNY student organization, have expressed opposition to the plan.

Similar attacks are under way at the City University of New York. The university’s board has authorized an increase in

tuition this coming fall of up to 5 percent, following a previously approved 5-percent increase effective this month. Tuition for in-state undergraduates has increased 44 percent since 2003, 15 percent since 2009 alone. Thirty-eight percent of CUNY students come from families with household incomes of less than \$20,000.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, SUNY tuition is now \$4,970 per year for in-state students plus mandatory fees that average \$1,235. CUNY’s tuition is \$4,830 per year plus about \$400 in fees. Adding room and board and books gives New York public education about a \$15,000-a-year price tag. At most, financial aid covers a third of this amount.

Many working class students who would otherwise have attended four-year colleges are forced to seek lower-cost, two-year degrees at various community colleges. Over the last 10 years, for example, enrollment has increased by 43 percent at CUNY’s Community Colleges, while funding from the city and the state has been steadily decreasing. Recent cuts have resulted in a \$90 million reduction in state aid to community colleges. CUNY community colleges have been hit with an additional 5.4 percent midyear budget cut that will inevitably lead to staff layoffs and increases in class size.

Scattered protests by SUNY and CUNY students and staff have taken place, but so far have been limited to appeals to the governor and legislature for fairness and a recognition of the importance of public higher education. These appeals have fallen on deaf ears. In a December 19 article, the *New York Times* veritably gloats over what they see as a “quieter” reaction to proposed CUNY tuition increases than has characterized student protests in the past.

State and municipal budget crises in New York and all across the country mean unrelenting assaults on public education at all levels. Those who promote the idea that pressure tactics will prompt the state government to lessen these attacks are guilty of criminal deception. The Democrats and Republicans are united in the aim to make workers and students pay for the economic crisis while the elite lavishes ever-greater wealth upon itself.

The expansion of higher education in the United States to a significant percentage of working class and middle class youth during the post-World War II boom is rapidly being returned to its previous condition—a privilege for the wealthy elite. Students must unite with the working class for independent political action to establish a workers government under which high-quality public education will be accessible as a right.



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