As has become a pattern, this report is more episodic than comprehensive; focusing on those elements of my service that I believe will either be of interest to the broadest audience or be important for you to know. Since Nancy Zimpher arrival almost three years ago, there is much to report on, beginning with the fact that it’s spring, which means we have budget news.

**BUDGET**

Consistent with last year’s promises, the budget news is relatively good, with a continuation of state funding at last year’s levels. But, there were two areas that received an increase, each of which had been among SUNY’s priorities: the per FTE compensation to community colleges was raised from and the three SUNY hospitals will receive approximately $30 million more than they received last year. In addition, the Governor has provided $30 million, to be matched by SUNY, for three $20 million development grants to comprehensive colleges, much like those offered the university centers last year. Details to follow.

So good news.

For the first time in a long while, we have a degree of fiscal stability, a window that allows for multi-year planning. SUNY is using the moment to recreate the formula by which state dollars are distributed to the state operated campuses. The last time the formula was “run” was 2008, after which the system faced significant cuts annually, sometimes more than one in a budget year, which meant that the distribution of state support was constantly in flux, adjusting year to year to keep each campus and sector from facing a disastrous budget year. The result is that we currently have no purposeful formula to distribute, based on the new budget, enrollment and strategic realities.

Almost three years ago, Monica Rimai began a planning process that has proceeded under the leadership of Brian Hutzley, with the goal of producing a clearer, simpler distribution formula for state support. While discussions have proceeded a long way, the final elements of a new plan have NOT yet been set. I expect recommendations will be ready for campus vetting later this spring or early summer. Then they will go to the Chancellor’s Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees.

What is certain? There will be no changes in the campus distributions for base state support in the 2012-13 cycle, and during the subsequent years full implementation will be accomplished through a three or four year staged process. While the new Resource Allocation Model will inevitably mean that some campuses gain while others lose a measure of state support, the planning process has been broadly inclusive to date, which I expect will continue.

A final word. While it is impossible at this time to know the exact parameters of this change, it is also impossible to argue against the need for a rational system of distributing SUNY’s state support. Given the unique current stability in state funding, it is the ideal time to address the issue. And the budget process has been moved up earlier in the annual calendar so that we will be able to have greater certainty about what SUNY is requesting that has been true for many years.

**CHANCELLOR’S AGENDA**

While the administration’s commitment to the Six Big Ideas embedded in the “Power of SUNY” continues to be the focus of much of the current planning, after Chancellor Zimpher’s annual State of the University address last January, different groups were formed (or in some cases re-formed) to
oversee our progress on “Getting Down to Business” (see the organization at http://www.suny.edu/powerofsuny/framework/goals_ideas_teams/gettingdowntobusiness8.cfm). To foster accountability, each of the groups is chaired by a senior member of the administration and staffed with faculty and administration from across the system.

One way of looking at what has happened – and continues to happen – is that SUNY is moving from planning to doing, making certain that the goals identified in the “Power of SUNY” will be realized. And one of those goals from the beginning has been the elimination of any remaining impediments to student mobility.

**STUDENT MOBILITY**

A recap of where we are as a system and how we got there might be in order.

First, everyone needs to remember that for almost forty years, the “seamless transfer” of AA/AS degrees to parallel baccalaureate programs across the system has been stated – and restated – as one of the core policies of the SUNY system. About this there is NO question, and against this there can be NO argument. Yet, for most of the period, the promise has been dead-letter law, with few specific system-wide procedures that could make it more real.

Second, in 1998, following the law of unintended consequences, the new SUNY GER served as a basic template for much of the coursework that students on any and all SUNY campuses would undertake in the first two years. Unfortunately, instead of the promised half of the first two years (30 credits in 10 specified areas), the community college presidents said only seven of the ten areas could be guaranteed, and that was usually accomplished by advisement rather than revisions of existing degree requirements. Still, this was an important step toward seamless transfer, as it created a mandatory web of course articulations that satisfied baccalaureate degree requirements. Faculty were still at the heart of articulation, but SUNY had substituted the judgment of system-wide faculty committees instead of the traditionally campus-based faculty. And, despite numerous campus variations and additions, the general education requirements themselves possessed much greater agreement than had those of the preceding decades.

Five years ago, the Joint Committee on Transfer and Articulation recommended several wrinkles to existing processes, including the creation of two appeals processes for the transfer of academic credit, one that could be initiated by a student, the other by a campus. And these processes were to be prominently displayed on a campus’s website, especially the student appeal forms, a requirement that we are just now learning was rarely realized. Few students and even fewer campuses have used these processes, but there is a real question as to whether that fact results from the lack of need or from the lack of necessary knowledge about the appeal processes.

Three years ago, shortly after the arrival of Chancellor Zimpher, the Provost initiated a complex process that again relied on organized system-wide faculty committees (more than thirty at last count) charged with identifying four to six foundational courses in their disciplines. Some majors, including those in the Natural Sciences, had a larger number, since these programs rely on a large number of ancillary courses (math, for example) students need to complete by the end of their second year to be “rising juniors.”

And so, this is where we are today: if a student completes the SUNY GER at a community college and if that same student completes the specified foundational courses with a grade of “C” or better (which is what is needed for the system-wide guarantee), then he or she seeks to transfer to a parallel program at
a baccalaureate campus, he or she be in very good shape. Truthfully, while any such a student should have traveled a good way along the path to seamless transfer, problems remain.

First, the general education requirements may create an issue, since such requirements, after the Board of Trustees revisions of January 2010, can differ significantly on a campus. Each faculty can craft its own specific requirements, using the new 7 of the 10 specified areas, or keeping the older 10 of 10, or maybe 13 of 10, with additional coursework specified for some areas, such as the natural sciences or foreign languages. This is before additional “local” requirements are added. For this reason, the UFS Executive Committee believes we must begin any consideration of general education with a clearer understanding of what campuses now require and how these requirements affect transfer students.

Second, the major courses may not contain the specific bodies of knowledge or sets of skills that the program faculty of a receiving campus expect all their majors to have mastered before they begin their upper division courses.

Finally, one problem remains that no one has yet addressed: many of the larger community colleges offer a selection of courses in many disciplines that rivals or exceeds those offered by baccalaureate colleges. These often are what we would see as upper division courses, designed to be taken in the junior or senior year, and constitute an essential part of the academic major. This creates difficulties for students who transfer with an Associate’s degree that can include almost 30 credits in a single discipline.

For these reasons, we are a long way from approving a blanket transfer of “all SUNY AA/AS degrees,” as the community college presidents insist we do. And we are also a long way from having a fool-proof system that meets the promise of “seamless transfer” in every instance for every student. Yet, we have made remarkable progress in the past five years, using faculty committees at every level to guide the process. At the very least, we can now say that we see the remaining problems and are committed to continuing our working on the issue. Returning to gen ed....

GENERAL EDUCATION

In her State of the University address, the Chancellor committed the system to the “complete transfer of a SUNY AA or AS degree to satisfy gen-ed requirements at a SUNY four-year institution.” While this came under the larger heading of “Student Mobility,” it has taken on a life of its own, bringing SUNY general education back into conversation and focus.

Initially, the FCCC urged that we move immediately to a “full evaluation” of the SUNY general education program, reasonably arguing that it, like every academic program, should be subject to periodic review. The UFS Executive Committee demurred, however, largely due to two concerns: the lack of information regarding the changes campuses may or may have put into place in the past two years since the SUNY GER was revised by the Board of Trustees, and a concern that any process, unless very carefully drawn and limited, could result in new, different gen ed requirements emanating from System Administration.

Currently, we have agreed to jointly support the Provost’s Office collection and evaluation of information needed to better understand the current state of SUNY GER across the system...and its impact on student mobility. Both organizations are well represented on the Provost’s Advisory Committee on Student Mobility. In addition, FCCC has asked us to participate in a meeting next fall that will examine the best ways of evaluating general education.
SUNY’S CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE

In late February, after a member of the Board of Trustees who was Chair of the Board’s Education, College Readiness and Success Committee resigned, Chairman McCall asked me to consider chairing the committee. While the committee focuses on SUNY’s relationship to the educational pipeline at every level, it also includes a responsibility for working with the Vice Chancellor Duncan-Poitier and the senior staff of SUNY’s Charter School Institute for both operations and policy. A little known fact across the system is that SUNY has authorized more charter schools than any other agency in New York. Another is that the SUNY schools outperform other public schools in their respective areas and the Institute is considered a national leader among authorizing agencies.

I have neither the time for the space to fill in this story completely, but a few observations. To most of us across the system, the Charter School Institute is terra incognita, a part of the system that we don’t see and perhaps few would want to. But, it is not only there, it has been for more than a decade, and it is increasingly important now as the federal government has emphasized charter schools in the “Race to the Top.”

I was asked to continue the work recognized as among the best in the country, but more. The Charter School Institute has been outside of SUNY’s administrative control, reporting directly to the Board of Trustees, the only such reporting structure in SUNY. That is changing, as Vice Chancellor Duncan-Poitier, an experienced, dynamic administrator, now provides administrative oversight, which is consistent with, yet distinct from, her responsibilities for SUNY education pipeline initiative. What has been missing from is mix is a research agenda, one that will study the SUNY charter schools closely, identify what has worked (as has been the case most of the time) and what hasn’t in those rare instances where SUNY has taken away a charter, effectively closing a school. That is what I would like to help put into place in the next fifteen months, working with our graduate schools of education to create a research agenda that will serve both SUNY and the Institute well in their authorizing function and will uncover any specific common elements among the most successful charter schools that could be replicated throughout public education. If there are better ideas, SUNY should be the agency by which they are disseminated across the state and brought into the classrooms where they can give every student a better chance for a more meaningful educational experience. Student success is indeed our highest priority.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Many of us believe that the movement for assessment mistakes a tyranny of numerical specificity for learning, which as we all agree is the product principally of hard work by our students. They are the ones who have been tasked with the essential heavy lifting in the ed biz. And one of the unalloyed joys of my current position is that I get to witness first-hand several different times during the academic year those ceremonies where student accomplishment is recognized and celebrated, a perfect warm-up for the commencement season that will be upon us very soon.

This spring, we have had two such special occasions: the February 29 exhibition of undergraduate student work, “Discovery,” which was the product of extraordinary work by our Undergraduate Committee (most ably chaired by Prof. Joy Hendrick) and the Chancellor’s Awards for Student Excellence. The first showcased 89 exhibitions (posters, videos, demonstrations) of undergraduate research, presented by 125 students (accompanied by 65 of their faculty) from 36 campuses, both community college and baccalaureate campuses. It was held in the Legislative Office Building in an attempt to reach legislators and their staffs, and it worked as several dropped by to chat with students from their districts about their projects. The second, which was held on April 4, was hosted by the
Chancellor who presented Award medallions to more than 200 students. These students represented every campus in SUNY and ranged from sophomores to advanced graduate students. The events continue. Next month, there will be reception in Albany for the student art exhibit, at which the recipients of the Thayer art scholarship will be announced. This is when we get to see the extraordinary work our students can accomplish. Congratulations to all, the students and their faculty mentors, their families and the professional staff who make SUNY education possible.

I’ll close on this high note, knowing that there is much in the past two months that has not been covered and in the hope that my selection has been.

Collegially,

Kenneth P. O’Brien
President
April 13, 2012