President’s Report
Winter 2013

Winter is upon us...snow squalls flying from the lakes across upstate, west and north winds blowing at will, and students, staff and faculty once again returning to campuses for the beginning of another spring term, hopefully refreshed, ready to meet the challenges of classes, research, artistic production, and professional service.

For some, however, the rhythm of our annual academic calendar works a bit differently. Administrators of every persuasion use the intersession break to prepare for the new term, making certain classrooms will be ready, preparing to implement the latest policies that have emanated either from their own campus or from System Administration, and even thinking carefully about the Chancellor’s latest “State of the University” and the initiatives she announced for the coming year. Winter 2013 marks the third such address, and it was immediately preceded by a raft of important Board of Trustees resolutions that promise varying degrees of change for all of us. The report that follows focuses to a large extent on these initiatives and policies, providing something of a primer for the challenges we now face.

Legacy Initiatives and Problems.

Shared Services. The initiative continues, with campus administrations working (collaboratively) to ensure that potential savings through shared services have been identified and are in the process of being realized. To date, according to the Chancellor’s “State of the University” address, the savings amount to $20 million, a fifth of the three-year goal, with much more to come this year through changes in the system-wide IT processes, platforms and hardware. Savings are real, and the initiative appears to be on target to generate significant savings in the years ahead, hopefully permanent savings in administration that will be transferred to instruction and direct student services.

Central to Shared Services was the much-reviled “Shared Presidencies.” While I know where this stands for the six campuses at this writing, I am not sure where it is going. Morrisville State College and SUNY IT proved to be something of a mismatched pair, and the former now has an Interim President (William Murabito) and President Wolf Yeigh has returned to his full-time duties at SUNY IT. SUNY Cobleskill and SUNY Delhi continue to be led by one presiding officer, the indefatigable Candace Vancko, but she has publicly stated that this institutional marriage is probably not long for this world, and one of her goals is to provide the maximum integration of the back office administrative operations, while preparing for the day when each campus will have its own presiding officer. That leaves SUNY Canton and SUNY Potsdam, where the toxic air has been freshened significantly by the appointment of an Interim President at Canton. President Fritz Schwaller has indicated his intention to leave office by the end of the current academic year, and the Board and administration are engaged in identifying an Interim President who will succeed Dr. Schwaller at Potsdam.
**Downstate Medical University.** This is probably the most difficult issue facing SUNY in the near term, as the campus and hospitals continue to bleed significant red ink, for which an immediate transfusion of $75 million from SUNY campus reserves bought time, but not as much as hoped for. Without financial assistance, Downstate will run out of funds about the same as the federal Treasury, that is, this spring. The financial problems are inextricably bound to national health care policy and re-imbursement rates for Medicare and Medicaid, the systematic withdrawal of state support for public hospitals, particularly the funding provided for the fringe benefits negotiated by the state, and what appears to be financial mismanagement (according to the Comptroller’s recent report) of the previous administration.

The new campus and hospital administration, ably led by an experienced leader of successful academic medical centers, is working against the clock and all odds to create a stable financial plan. But truthfully, it is easier to explain how the dire situation evolved than it is to frame solutions, either for the hospitals that provide essential health services, or the many tens of thousands of central Brooklyn residents who are threatened with the loss of that care, or to the many hundreds of SUNY employees threatened with the loss of employment and their ability to serve this community. Unfortunately, almost all the pressures are to maintain the unsustainable status quo, with no loss of employment or renegotiation of contracts, no loss of services to the community, and no infusion of significant state aid that might make the first two possible.

**New Policies.**

**The New Resource Allocation Model.** This administration’s proposal for a new Resource Allocation Model to distribute the annual amount allocated by New York State for the operation of SUNY’s 34 state-operated campuses was passed by the Board of Trustees in December (see [http://www.suny.edu/Board_of_Trustees/webcastdocs/resource%20allocation%20model%20Revised.txt](http://www.suny.edu/Board_of_Trustees/webcastdocs/resource%20allocation%20model%20Revised.txt)). As indicated earlier, a three-year implementation cycle is built into the plan, with 30% of the changed allocation occurring in each of the next two years, beginning next fall, and the final 40% in the 2015-2016 budget year. However, campuses that suffer from the new distribution model will receive significant transitional funding during that period, and if need be, beyond. The administration understands that three years might not be sufficient for some institutions to affect the changes necessary in their relative enrollment mix. Remember the model rests to a large extent on enrollment, with instructional costs calculated through the use of a national database by discipline, by level of course and by type of institution.

**Student Mobility.** It’s odd to write of student mobility, a SUNY policy for more than forty years, as a “new” policy. Yet, in December, the Board passed a new mobility policy that contained several key elements. (see [http://www.suny.edu/Board_of_Trustees/webcastdocs/Seamless%20Transfer%20Revised.txt](http://www.suny.edu/Board_of_Trustees/webcastdocs/Seamless%20Transfer%20Revised.txt)). First, students in AA and AS degree programs – and students in BA and BS programs -- should complete the SUNY General Education program (30 credits in 7 of 10 specified areas, including math and composition) and a number of courses approved for each of
more than forty academic majors. The number in the latter group varies, with more in the sciences for example than in the traditional liberal arts disciplines. Second, the degrees themselves will be limited to 64 credits for an associate’s degree and 126 for a bachelor’s, unless more is specified by accreditation agencies. From these two, the obvious intent of the resolution is to make SUNY community college students enrolled in transfer programs the effective equivalent of rising juniors who began their course of study on a baccalaureate campus. To do so, means campuses face new constraints on their ability to write curriculum. Finally, baccalaureate campuses may well exceed the SUNY general education credit and distribution requirements, as long as those additional requirements will not delay a student’s time to degree.

“State of SUNY”
Last week Chancellor Zimpher delivered her third “State of SUNY” address to an enthusiastic reception. As has been the case in the past, she announced a number of new initiatives, all within the larger context of SUNY’s commitment to access, completion and success. Among the many in the speech, which can be accessed at http://www.suny.edu/chancellor/sou.cfm, I’ll concentrate on one, “Open SUNY,” the proposal that SUNY will use for its on-line learning initiative in the future.

One way of understanding the Zimpher administration’s initiatives is to view most of them through the lens of “system,” which reveals a concentrated effort on several fronts to remake SUNY from an administratively, but very loosely, connected collection of campuses into a much more tightly integrated university system. Much of the effort focuses on closer administrative collaboration. But, other initiatives clearly break with the autonomy traditionally granted SUNY campuses to act in their self-defined interests, calling themselves whatever they choose, crafting outsized academic programs, or developing independent plans for growth.

In this regard, the report for an “Open SUNY” initiative sets forth a blueprint, which emerged from a group the Chancellor chaired (see the Interim Report under “Meetings/Materials” at http://www.suny.edu/powerofsuny/framework/goals_ideas_teams/GettingDowntoBusiness8 Team.cfm). It will depend upon much greater coordination on the part of our campuses to align their efforts in distance education to a common framework, a common platform, even a shared curriculum. The problems are real, since we do not yet have a system-wide infrastructure that could support the vision. But, the reality is that if SUNY is to work meaningfully in the on-line education space, it has few options but to act to create the governing and delivery structures quickly. To that end, I am working with FACT 2 and FCCC leadership and with Carey Hatch, the Associate Provost for Academic Technology & Information Services, who will lead the effort for SUNY system, to develop a system-wide faculty group that can advise, even shape, the direction of “Open SUNY.” Obviously, this effort is critically important to our future and we need to make certain that we get it as right as we can from the point forward.

Concluding Thoughts. Much has been accomplished in the past years: a strategic plan that rewrote the relationship between SUNY and the citizens we serve, the Research Foundation’s dramatic change in leadership with the arrival of Dr. Timothy Killeen from the National Science Foundation, the progress
made on student mobility, the active engagement and support for public higher education by an extraordinary Board of Trustees, stable funding for the near term (“stable,” not “adequate”), and unusually talented and experienced administrative leadership at SUNY system that has garnered national attention, to name a few.

All of which gives us, those who work across this extraordinary system, an opportunity we have not had for years, a breathing space in which to pause and think more clearly about the work we do, the ways we are connected to our disciplines, our students, and the larger public. What does “technology transfer” really mean for our campuses? How can we better educate today and tomorrow’s citizens, whose first obligation must be to find meaningful place in the workforce so they can provide for themselves and their families? What is the best relationship we can currently craft between the university and economic development? How do we more immediately and effectively add to the rich public life of our state’s communities? These questions are worth our precious time and our closest consideration, for the answers will to a large extent determine the success this university will have in the next half century.

Respectfully submitted,
Kenneth P. O’Brien