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Higher-ed systems need brawn and brains

By ROBERT PAASWELL

First published: Sunday, December 23, 2007

I serve as one of two faculty members on the governor's Commission on Higher Education.

The faculty perspective is that of the classroom and research lab, mentors of the emerging generations of students who will grow both intellectually and professionally as they take their knowledge to their lives and work.

It is that dual role that is so important. To have a citizenry well educated at every level, the college must provide both the wherewithal for students to become intellectually self-aware and the specialized learning for the careers they will have during their lives.

It is this real and continuing responsibility, this engagement in teaching and learning, that has led the commission, from this member's perspective, to produce the bold yet achievable recommendations submitted to the governor.

Why do I say achievable?

While we have set our targets at the peer states of California, Texas, Michigan and Florida, with their large and extremely well-funded public higher-education systems, we do not do so with envy. New York, in the City University of New York and State University of New York systems, has a level of leadership in the chancellors and presidents that is the equal of any of these.

Across CUNY and SUNY, there are a number of academicians in the sciences, arts and professions who can hold their own against their peers. A significant problem is that these ranks are spread thin. New York has the brains, but not the brawn.

Why do I say bold?

In a world marked by global competition, where information flows at the speed of light, and our growing ranks of students gather this information just as quickly, SUNY and CUNY need to enlarge their ranks.

To be cutting-edge in research, whether in nanotech, computer science, biology, environmental science or quantitative political science, clusters of faculty are needed. Competitiveness requires faculty be in the lab as well as the classroom.

Our colleagues at Berkeley and the University of Texas understand this. We need to attract to CUNY and SUNY the best minds in the nation, the youngest and brightest; and we need to keep them here for their careers.

To do so, we must, while investing in these human resources, also invest in modernizing our campuses, providing new research labs, classrooms with Internet access and instant global communications.

Our students are ready for this; we must make our classrooms ready for them. We are not only competing with MIT and Berkeley, we are competing with Shanghai University and the University of Delhi -- and they have a big head start.

The commission has looked at the higher-ed system at every level and has provided recommendations to reduce the friction between the levels and among the schools.

It also has provided recommendations to improve the student experience (and reduce the red tape) and to improve student opportunity to advance in the system.

Simply put, the investment in better students and faculty will be seen in better workers and innovative economic opportunities in New York.

It is time to provide the brawn.

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