

Overcrowded and Underfunded

New York's public university systems, and beleaguered students, are an extreme example of national trends

By Jon Marcus

NEW YORK

JUST UPTOWN from the epicenter of the world's economic crisis, Borough of Manhattan Community College is a symbol of how the financial cataclysm that began a few blocks away on Wall Street has battered public higher education in America.

It's crowded. Very, very crowded. Every seat is taken in every classroom you can see. Some of those seats are in the aisles. There are lines outside the computer labs. Lines snake through the food court. There are particularly long lines at the financial-aid office.

With a central campus built to handle 8,000 students, Borough of Manhattan is straining to contain some 21,700, part of a 12 percent enrollment increase at the six community colleges of the City University of New York and an eight percent jump at CUNY systemwide, including in its 11 senior colleges. Enrollment at CUNY's upstate counterpart, the 64-campus State University of New York, hit an unprecedented 439,523 this fall. At CUNY, there are more than 259,000 students, surpassing the previous record set in 1974, when it was free.

And free, it isn't. Already the seventh highest in the nation, New York's community college tuition rose again this year to help fill ever-worsening multibillion-dollar state revenue shortfalls that also have resulted from the deep recession. Tuition at the four-year SUNY schools spiked by double digits. More price hikes are likely. This at a time when nearly two

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thirds of CUNY's community college students come from families earning less than \$30,000 a year. Many are so poor there's a program to help them register for food stamps. One city council member said the tuition increase would force at least one in five to drop out. But there are plenty more waiting to take their places. Helping fuel the enrollment surge at CUNY and SUNY has been a record number of applicants from outside the state—applicants, officials say, who have given up on even more expensive private universities, and for whom a public university education is still a comparative bargain. Good thing, too, since the public universities are taking on so

many students largely because they need the money from tuition that each student brings in. Plus, although the subsidy is dropping, CUNY and SUNY still get \$2,675 from the state for every full-time equivalent community college student they sign up. Like public universities in many states, they are increasing both enrollment and tuition to compensate for falling state support.

What's happening in public higher education in New York, whose dual public university systems are the nation's second and third largest (after the California State University system), is an extreme example of what's happening to public higher education all over America. Public universities are among the first to be cut when

government revenues get tight, making state allocations and tuition unpredictable and inconsistent, and shutting out poor and, increasingly, middle-class students who don't meet income cutoffs for financial aid.

New York tends not to raise tuition when revenues are steady, because that would trigger a dog-chasing-its-tail increase in the cost of its self-adjusting state financial aid program. But when times get tough, tuition rises sharply anyway—28 percent in 1995, another 28 percent in 2003, yet another 15 percent this year. Funding for public higher education in New York “is like a drunken sailor lurching from lamppost to lamppost,” one insider said. “The state waits till things get really bad. Then, when no one can afford it, it raises the price.”

There are other ways that problems in New York mirror those in other states—although, as with so many things, what happens in New York seems that much more dramatic. At a time of dwindling resources, some SUNY campuses are chafing to expand and add attention-grabbing research, while CUNY plans a research center that faculty say will shortchange students in the name of institutional prestige.

Campuses are so overloaded that there aren't enough seats in required courses, meaning getting a degree takes longer—costing students, and the state, still more. “That's the last thing hard-pressed New York families need right now—families who



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Nathaniel Brooks, Black Star, for CrossTalk



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planned financially for four years of college for their kids, not five,” said Phillip Smith, president of United University Professions, the SUNY faculty union, and himself the parent of a SUNY student. Only 30 percent of CUNY community college students earn a degree or transfer within three years, although that is better than the dismal national average of 25.7 percent.

Even as demand soars, the state allocations for CUNY and SUNY budgets have plummeted by more than \$400 million. Per-student funding has declined for four straight years. When New York’s \$1.2 billion share of federal stimulus money for education arrived, all but a meager \$35.4 million of it was given to schools that teach kindergarten through grade 12, thanks to a complicated education funding

formula imposed on the state by the courts. And of every dollar collected from the double-digit increases in tuition, 90 cents went not to the universities, but to plug holes in the state’s general fund, doing little to help accommodate the spiraling demand for higher education. Even that was a compromise pushed by an embattled governor past a General Assembly that hoped to dodge the blame for inevitable cuts and cost increases in a state where, by spring 2009, revenues were down an almost inconceivable 36 percent from the previous year. They could have taken all the proceeds from tuition if they’d wanted to—and, in the past, they have.

New York’s tuition increases are nothing less than a tax on students, critics say. “We call it the SUNY tax,” said Maria Davila, a 21-year-old senior majoring in political science at SUNY New Paltz, a crowded maze of chain-link fences circling construction sites, where dorm rooms built for two are now housing three students apiece, after 200 more freshmen than expected showed up last fall.

Almost none of the money actually goes to higher education. “Forget the millionaires,” editorialized the *New York Daily News*. “The people who have been sucker-punched the hardest under New York’s bloated, irresponsible budget are the families whose children are enrolled in the state universities.” And while the cost of

attending CUNY and SUNY might be higher, what students get for their money are courses that are harder to get into, cuts in programs, and services that have vanished or are thinly stretched under the weight of surging enrollment. CUNY has half as many faculty as it did in the 1970s, the last time enrollment was this high. SUNY has cut staff, imposed hiring

freezes, and increased its reliance on adjuncts.

“Classes are packed. You’re shut out. You have to wait up at night and pray for somebody to drop,” said Jermaine Morris, 23, a student at Borough of Manhattan Community College who has been working for three and a half years toward an associate’s degree that should have taken two. “I was supposed to graduate last semester, but couldn’t get the classes I needed.” Morris hopes to eventually transfer to a CUNY senior college to get a degree in civil engineering, but he started at the community college because it was comparatively cheaper. So much cheaper that, while Morris can’t wait to get out, some students say they plan to stick around even after getting their associate’s degrees, in order to pile up more transfer credits at community college rates, only worsening the crowding.

The competition is getting tougher, too. Last year, as a joke, someone at private New York University posted a phony flyer suggesting students transfer to CUNY to save money. It’s no longer a joke. The number of applicants to CUNY from the New York City suburbs jumped by nearly 20 percent this year, and from outside New York State by 12 percent, evidence that families are now picking “financial safety schools”—more often than not, public universities—based not on their children’s likelihood of getting in, but on their ability to pay.

SUNY saw a 20 percent jump this year in applicants from out of state. Officials speculate that these are students who might once have gone to Ithaca or Fordham, but whose families can’t swing private university tuition. SAT scores and high school grade point averages of entering students rose significantly this fall. At SUNY Stony Brook, the average SAT score of the middle 50 percent of applicants was 20 percent higher this year than last. At New Paltz, near the storied town of Woodstock, the entering grade point average has climbed from 85 to 92, and the average SAT score from 1100 to 1160 in the past decade. “We used to be an artsy, hippie school, but now it’s all really smart, collegiate, stuffy people who are majoring in economics,” Davila said. “The people who are gone are the ones who didn’t get very good grades in high school and couldn’t afford to hire SAT tutors.”

It’s not just Stony Brook and New Paltz. SUNY campuses are “getting smarter kids, and kids with more means,” said Michael Trunzo, the system’s vice chancellor for government relations. “It’s a pocketbook issue.” They are threatening to squeeze out others for whom public universities like CUNY and SUNY, with their legacies of serving ethnic and racial minorities and urban and rural families, were set up to serve.

“The schools are pleased that they’ve been able to—quote, unquote—raise standards,” said Deborah Glick, a graduate of CUNY’s Queens College who chairs the General Assembly’s higher education committee. “But who gets left out are people who are more marginal, those who have had some additional struggles. Then they raise tuition. For some students, a few hundred dollars is the difference between making it and not making it.” Added Smith, “We’re seeing a state that is not taking responsibility for what it created.”

In fact, even before the most recent cuts, state aid per student to SUNY fell by five percent, and to CUNY by 14 percent, when adjusted for inflation, according to the independent Fiscal Policy Institute. Since 1991, the proportion of the SUNY budget underwritten by the state has fallen

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from more than 42 percent to less than 33 percent. "That's not a smart economic strategy, and it's not good stewardship of two of the country's great systems of public higher education," said David Kallick, a senior fellow at the institute.

Then again, SUNY, for its part, had no official

stewardship at all for two years. That's how long it went without a chancellor before the appointment of Nancy Zimpher, former president of the University of Cincinnati, who took office on June 1. And it shows the importance to public higher education of something else: leadership. During its time without it, SUNY suffered \$200 million in state cuts. The chaos was exacerbated by the resignation of Governor Eliot Spitzer, a higher education booster, after revelations that he had patronized prostitutes.

Spitzer was not around to implement the recommendations of a commission on higher education he had named, the first in New York in more than 30 years, that called for 2,000 new full-time faculty and billions of dollars in new investment. He wasn't there to follow through on his plan to establish a \$4 billion endowment fund for CUNY and SUNY, either. (He had held a conference call with university administrators about the proposal just a day before the scandal broke.)

Spitzer's successor, David Paterson, by contrast, has been too busy reacting to the budget crisis to advocate for higher education, or much of anything else.

Zimpher started her job with a tour of all 64 SUNY campuses—7,507 miles over 95 days, by land, sea and air—dropping hints here and there about her plans. She said she favored offering four-year degrees at SUNY's community colleges, for instance. But hired in part on the basis of her reputation for strengthening marquee research at the University of Cincinnati, she also said the more immediate priority was to teach and to conduct the kind of research that could translate into commerce. "Academics see themselves as citizens of the world," Zimpher told one campus audience. "They seek national and international recognition for their work. But the greatest pathway to national and international recognition is to serve your state."

It was an important declaration. Like many public universities around the country, several SUNY schools are anxious to expand the research they conduct, even at a time when there is almost no money to do it, and when other states have added programs and entire campuses they now find they can not afford. The most ambitious is the University of Buffalo (wary of the SUNY brand after years of underfunding for the system, it, like Binghamton and other campuses, prefers to drop the "SUNY" from its name), which has proposed adding 10,000 students and 2,300 staff in a quest to become a

nationally ranked research university by 2020. A bill introduced by its legislative delegation would have given Buffalo the right to pay for this by raising its tuition independently of the other SUNY campuses, which all now charge the same amount. The idea was met immediately with demands from the SUNY universities in Albany, Binghamton and Stony Brook that they be allowed to do so too.

During her visit to Stony Brook, Zimpher said that was okay by her. The research universities, after all, now have to get by on the same tuition as smaller teaching campuses. But in an interview back at her desk in Albany, the chancellor cautioned that the desire to do research "sometimes blurs the recognition that public universities were created to serve their communities. We have to reexamine the traditional definition of our mission," she said. "The investment in high-end research provides the jobs for which we are producing graduates. It's not an either-or." The best way for SUNY to win global recognition, Zimpher said, is by helping New York rebound from the recession.

That is the very practical message New York's higher education interest groups hope will bring back their support. Highly educated and well supplied with universities of all types, New York is nonetheless a distant 39th among the states in spending on public higher education. "I don't know why there isn't more voice to the constituents of higher education," Zimpher said. "I know it's there. How could you have half a million students (at SUNY), 2.4 million alumni and all their families, and not have advocacy for public higher education?" The practical answer, she acknowledged, is competition for state funding with such mandated services as health and prisons.

But universities create jobs and workers that can help New York solve the very budget problems that got it into this mess. "This is a time to invest, oddly enough," Zimpher said. "The only way we're going to grow our way out of this situation is to invest in higher education. No other business in the world would starve the growth sector in the process of feeding these mandates."

On this point, the faculty union brass agrees. The union's new motto: "SUNY is the Solution." It is pushing members to drag business and political leaders onto their campuses and show them, close up, what they are doing. "We can no longer live in the world we used to. We need to do a better job of educating people," Smith said in his office outside Albany. In the parking lot, a handwritten sign warned of hornets' nests



Robert Hooman, Black Star, for CrossTalk

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on a day the headline in the *Albany Times-Union* read, equally ominously, “Paterson Warns of More Red Ink.” Smith acknowledges some pushback. “Our faculty tend to be rather aloof and don’t really view themselves as an important cog in the economic engine,” he said. “We’ve found a certain resistance.”

Faculty at CUNY are even involving themselves in fundraising, which the system has promised the governor and legislature it will step up, under what it calls the CUNY Compact, a bid for greater and more stable state support. Already, CUNY has raised more than \$1.2 billion toward a goal of \$3 billion by 2015. It claims \$40 million from efficiencies including energy savings and an end to direct-mail advertising. SUNY

has consolidated telephone and electricity contracts and information technology. And both schools practice the kind of collaboration higher education reformers push, by teaming up with Columbia, NYU and other research institutions in the New York Structural Biology Center, collectively underwriting the expensive facilities and faculty required for study in such areas as structural genomics.

But CUNY also plans its own new center to house research in hot, grant-generating fields including photonics, nanotechnology and neuroscience—something not all of its science faculty necessarily support. “One of the concerns the science faculty has voiced to me is that the resources will follow that center, and the already crowded and cramped labs in a college campus in, let’s say, Queens, that those conditions will become even worse as the resources get diverted,” said Barbara Bowen, head of the CUNY faculty union. Jay Hershenson, CUNY’s senior vice chancellor for university relations, responded, “The quality of a university, at the end of the day, is a function of the quality of its faculty. And you must have excellent opportunities for research. A great university must have great research.”

What it also must have, most involved agree, is a more rational, regular system of tuition increases and budgets. “New York allocates funds for construction over a five-year period. Why can’t we do that with tuition?” Zimpher asked. One proposal would tie future increases to the higher education price index. Another would let schools make “modest” and “predictable” annual tuition increases on their own—something that now requires legislative action—and charge tuition that could vary by program and by campus. CUNY, too, seeks more predictable tuition hikes, in part because it is assumed that this is something New York’s beleaguered students would support.

But upstate at Hudson Valley Community College, which is part of the SUNY system, that does not entirely appear to be the case. At this campus in the northwestern New York town of Troy, a onetime steel town a fifth of whose residents live below the poverty line, the crowding manifests itself outside the walls, where there is a sea of cars. Cars spill over from the parking lots, jump curbs, block sidewalks, and sprawl across the grass.

Just days earlier, President Barack Obama spoke at this school about his goal of restoring the country to first in the world in the proportion of college graduates by 2020.

On the walls here, too, among the notices about the pep band and the Frisbee club, are posters about how to apply for food stamps. There’s a student-run food bank. In his office, where a picture of Obama hangs prominently, Clifton Dixon, president of the student government, said that times are tough. “We’re proud to have record enrollment, but if they continue to raise tuition, a lot of people won’t be able to afford it,” said Dixon, who returned to college 13 years after dropping out of high school and hopes to go to law school. “I’ve never heard any student, nor do I think I ever will, say, ‘Please raise my tuition.’ You can’t pay more of what you don’t have.”

Taking time out from preparing for a protest against the budget cuts, CUNY’s Barbara Bowen pondered where the students who can’t afford the public universities—or can’t get in—have gone. Many, she said, are opting for the private, for-profit programs, and are requiring high-priced loans of the type that advertise on subways, buses and late-night TV. “Or they are simply not going to college at all,” she speculated. “They have had obstacles placed in their path since day one, and once further obstacles were put in their path, they just couldn’t do it.”

Those who do go to college, said Bowen, “have the constant experience of having to fight to get their education. It takes a heroic effort when you have to line up for everything, squeeze into a class, hope you can get time with your professor. That’s a betrayal of students who have been led to believe that college is an opportunity for them. The experience of college should not be every day having to fight for a seat in class.” ♦

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