

March 21, 2010

Governor Paterson's Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act would authorize the CUNY and SUNY Boards of Trustees to implement tuition policy and differential tuition and move tuition policy outside of the state budgetary process. CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein and SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher have both endorsed this "rational tuition policy," saying it will allow students and families to plan for the costs of education and budget more effectively. This position ignores the radical and sweeping nature of Paterson's proposal: ending access to affordable education. Continuous tuition increases will price out low- and middle-income families and New York voters will lose all power to hold the decision makers accountable for these changes.

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Under the plan, the trustees could raise tuition each year a maximum of two and one half times the five-year rolling average of the Higher Education Price Index (HEPI), which measures the inflation rate of universities nationwide. The average increase in HEPI has been 5% per year since 1976, the first year of tuition at CUNY. Senior college tuition was \$925 per year then; today, it is \$4,600. If tuition is increased each year based on the five-year HEIP average, CUNY senior college tuition will be \$5,679 in 2015—\$1,000 more than today—based on HEPI data since the index began in 1961. If it is increased each year at the proposed maximum rate of two and a half times the average, tuition will be \$6,136. Current SUNY senior college tuition is \$4,970 per year; annual increases based on the HEPI average would put it at \$7,701 and, with maximum increases, \$8,320. (If the trustees had had this power for the past four decades, tuition could be over \$60,000 if maximum increases were made every year.)

No one should have power to set public tuition this high. If state legislators ever attempted this, they would be swiftly voted out of office. The problem is not using the HEPI average to calculate tuition increases. It is taking control over tuition away from the hands of elected officials and putting it in the hands of appointed trustees, who have zero public accountability. Fifteen of the seventeen SUNY trustees are appointed by the Governor; ten of the sixteen CUNY trustees with voting rights are appointed by the governor and five are appointed by the New York City mayor. Only the student and faculty trustees (the CUNY faculty trustee is non-voting) are elected by their constituencies and almost always vote against or abstain from tuition increases supported by the rest of the boards.

Removing tuition from the state budgetary process will simply result in finger pointing between the legislature and the trustees. With every cut in funding, the trustees will be told to choose between raising tuition or cutting student services, faculty salaries, and educational offerings. Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) awards will no longer keep pace with rising tuition costs—Paterson has already proposed cutting TAP awards in his budget proposal—and the resulting gap will place higher education out of reach of New York's poorest families.

Differential tuition will make this problem even worse. Under this part of the plan, trustees would be able to set different rates for different campuses, schools, and even specific programs. Fields with higher average salaries, such as business, professional programs, and the sciences, will face higher tuition charges. High sticker prices will prevent the neediest students from entering these fields, and all other degrees, now cheaper, will be devalued. This is a fundamental change in the mission of public education to provide all New Yorkers with affordable access to public education.

Other components of Paterson's proposal make good sense (e.g., streamlining procurement procedures for goods and services, giving SUNY power to lease its property, indemnifying SUNY students performing clinical or other experimental programs), and HEPI and other economic measurements should inform reasonable decisions to increase CUNY and SUNY tuition when absolutely necessary.

Decisions to raise tuition will be hard, and students and families will struggle to meet those costs when they must. But what Paterson is proposing is not a more rational way to make those decisions, but a complete restructuring of public higher education financing. State legislators have been elected to safeguard the future of New York by securing its investment in public education. Passing the Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act with irrevocably damage public higher education and undermine the future of the state.

In solidarity with the University Student Senate and the Professional Staff Congress,



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Co-Chair for Communications



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