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Budget slams UB 2020

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Would it be out of line to call leaders and members of the Assembly and State Senate unscrupulous, two-faced miscreants?

We don't think so, when it comes to reviewing their current position and past actions around increasing tuition for students at select State University of New York campuses, a final part of this year's bizarre budget process.

The Legislature, after four months of dithering that ends this week with one of the latest state budgets in history, finally has put a period at the end of a painfully drawn-out sentence.

It has completed the last piece of a piecemeal, \$136 billion spending plan that failed to give state universities the flexibility they need for growth and economic growth in campus communities, put off consideration of a property tax cap and of a revision for the Power for Jobs program, delayed \$100 billion in business tax breaks, eliminated sales tax breaks on clothes and shoes, hiked taxes on cigarettes and cut tax deductions for charitable giving in half. That's a pretty sad performance for a state already losing population and driving away businesses.

The budget did hold this year's increase in state spending to 2.4 percent, about the rate of inflation. But other, more responsible states have *cut* spending.

The failure to pass SUNY reforms that could have furthered UB 2020 expansion plans is acutely disappointing, derailing an effort critically important to this region. Sen. William T. Stachowski backed down from his threat to hold back his crucial vote for the budget until a deal emerged on the SUNY legislation, but all that emerged was a useless "framework." SUNY unions had opposed the measure, but now face possible faculty reductions and increased use of part-time professors.

Gov. David A. Paterson's inclusion of last year's UB 2020 legislation into this year's statewide Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act would have given the University at Buffalo and other campuses some relief from state regulations on contracting and allowed campus-private partnerships and autonomy in setting tuition increases. That would have driven expansion in downtown Buffalo, as well as put SUNY in

line with policies in other state university systems.

Former UB President Steven B. Sample lifted the university to new heights. Nothing that dramatic has happened since, but current President John B. Simpson's proposal represented another opportunity for UB to grow and stay in the higher ranks of such recognized institutions.

The reforms were based on groundwork by the UB and SUNY boards of trustees, and enjoyed widespread support from the Western New York community and many others. But Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver blocked this option, claiming that such increases could make state universities unaffordable to many.

But campuses were setting up offsetting financial aid programs, and the concept of gradual and predictable tuition increases would be far better for students than the occasional large tuition spikes that have been the hallmark of Legislature tuition control.

In the past, 100 percent of tuition increases have returned to the state; the governor at least changed that practice and set a new and helpful precedent in returning an increasing share of tuition money back to SUNY. The Empowerment Act would have ended state "sweeps" of tuition money into the general fund, making sure tuition revenues were spent in the system used by the students. So on the one hand, Silver pleads for lower tuition for students and with the other hand socks them with an increase of no benefit to them at the university they are attending.

Yes, we think this action, fairly common in the New York State Legislature, could be called unscrupulous and two-faced.

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