SUNY wants more aid, tuition increases

ALBANY – SUNY leaders on Tuesday requested $3 billion over five years to repair buildings at its 64 campuses and urged the state Legislature to continue a $300-a-year tuition increase.

The request is part of a proposed 17.5 percent state aid hike that the SUNY Board of Trustees in November sent to Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the state Legislature for the fiscal year that starts April 1. Cuomo in his budget Jan. 21 proposed a 1.7 percent increase for SUNY, up to $3.4 billion annually.

"While New York has made great strides in rebuilding its support, I cannot stress enough the need for greater investment," SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher testified at a budget hearing Tuesday.

Cuomo’s $142 billion budget includes $200 million a year to repair SUNY’s aging facilities, but Zimpher and college presidents pressed for the aid to be tripled — to $600 million a year, saying nearly half the buildings were built 40 to 50 years ago.

"We need continued capital investment in our aging infrastructure to ensure students have the innovative learning spaces they need for a high-quality education," SUNY New Paltz president Donald Christian testified. "New Paltz is a popular university, and our facilities are strained — even with some of the current capital projects."

In 2011, Cuomo and the state Legislature agreed to the SUNY 2020 program, which allows the colleges to increase tuition by $300 a year over five years. The move gave SUNY the independence to increase tuition without having to battle the Legislature every year over its request — which had been an annual fight.

Last November, the SUNY board agreed to another year of tuition increases for the fall semester, bringing in-state tuition to $6,470 a year. Zimpher and college officials urged legislators to extend the program for another five years, as well as the maintenance-of-effort pledge — which keeps SUNY clear of state budget cuts.

SUNY Binghamton president Harvey Stenger said it can take two years to hire faculty members and plan for facility improvements. SUNY has about 460,000 students.

"Rational tuition and maintenance of effort have allowed me to plan," he testified.

Still, some lawmakers questioned the growing cost of college, saying they are concerned about the debt that students incur when they leave.

"What are you doing to reduce the tremendous amount of student debt, which I find troubling?" said Sen. Toby Ann Stavisky, D-Queens.

Monroe Community College president Anne Kress said that the college works with students on financial counseling, saying at least half of the students at MCC graduate without any debt.

SUNY also requested $50 million annually over five years to expand an investment fund; Cuomo’s budget proposed $18 million for the initiative. The effort aims to increase the number of SUNY graduates a year to 150,000 students by 2020; SUNY currently has 93,000 graduates a year.

Zimpher has been a proponent of linking secondary education with college preparedness, but she said New York still has a long way to go, particularly in its urban public schools.

She said that for every 100 ninth-graders in New York, 73 will graduate from high school. Of those 73, only 23 will complete their college degree on time or close to on-time.

"And 23 is only the average. In our upstate urban centers, the statistics show a darker picture: Only 16 of every 100 ninth-graders will complete college close to on-time," she said in her testimony.

Kress said that community colleges can serve as the first step for students entering colleges. She pressed for more aid and the continuation of the tuition plan.
“You know us. We’re in your communities. We provide that initial gateway for students seeking the opportunity that all New Yorkers deserve,” Kress testified.

Stenger was asked by lawmakers about $50 million in the proposed budget to complete construction of a pharmacy school at SUNY Binghamton. He said the school aims to be a research hub that could draw in private businesses to the region.

“The market is still very strong” for new pharmacists and drug research, he said.

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