



To be successful, Johnson will have to nurture a positive relationship with the Republican-led Senate, the Democratic-led Assembly and a Democratic governor. | SUNY Polytechnic Institute press office

Five things to watch under the new SUNY chancellor

By **KESHIA CLUKEY** | 04/25/17 05:15 AM EDT

ALBANY — Leading one of the largest and most diverse higher education systems in the

nation will come with a myriad of challenges for incoming SUNY chancellor Kristina Johnson.

Johnson, 59, will take over on Sept. 5, succeeding Nancy Zimpher, who will step down in June. An interim president will be appointed at the June 21 SUNY Board of Trustees meeting.

Here are the top five things to take note of as Johnson prepares to take over the system:

Adapting to New York.

It's unclear if Johnson's background — as an engineer, entrepreneur, CEO of an energy company, and a former energy undersecretary for former President Barack Obama — will help her overcome her inexperience in leading a system of SUNY's size, said Ann Marcus, director of the Steinhardt Institute for Higher Education Policy at New York University.

Johnson is a former provost at Johns Hopkins University and senior vice president of academic affairs and dean of the Pratt School of Engineering at Duke University.

"She sounds impressive," Marcus told POLITICO New York. "I think it's going to be a big challenge for her ... She hasn't had public higher education background and hasn't had experience at mid-level or open-access institutions."

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The state's 64 campuses include two-and four-year schools, research centers and teaching

hospitals, each in different geographic regions with unique programs, strengths and weaknesses.

“Your leadership skills, communication skills need to be very strong,” Marcus said. “It sounds like she earned good marks as an inspiring leader, and she’ll have to figure out how to translate that.”

Johnson grew up in Denver and currently resides outside of Washington, D.C.

It will be challenge to get up to speed, but an outside perspective could also be beneficial, said Fred Kowal, president of United University Professions, the union that represents SUNY employees.

“I’m hopeful given her wide breadth of experience that we’ll get some new ideas that will move SUNY forward,” Kowal said. “I think having somebody from outside is a good move.”

Implementation of the Excelsior scholarship.

Johnson praised Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s Excelsior tuition scholarship program and its potential for improving access to higher education, saying it was one of the reasons she was attracted to the position.

The scholarship, once fully rolled out in 2019, will provide in-state tuition at the state’s two- and four-year public institutions for students from households earning up to \$125,000 annually. The initiative kicks off this fall with an income eligibility of \$100,000 annually. There is \$87 million allocated for the program in the state budget.

“The Excelsior Scholarship program will be tricky to implement across the system and Johnson will need to insure that it does not end up costing SUNY more money than the governor and the Legislature actually allocate,” said John Aubrey Douglass, a senior research fellow for public policy and higher education at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California in Berkeley.

Johnson will largely miss out on the initial bumps that schools are already and likely to continue facing over the summer. With deposit and billing deadlines looming, the Higher Education Services Corporation, which administers the scholarship, still is in the process of writing regulations. The application is expected to be available for students in late May.

Other than implementation, such as tracking whether students meet the 30-credit per year requirement, institutions could see a spike in enrollment, for which they may not have the capacity.

"There's going to be a need for resources to hire full-time faculty and staff in order to graduate students on time," Kowal said. He said he's hopeful that will happen because Johnson focused on increasing investment in staff at Duke.

Marcus said she hopes Johnson doesn't end up focusing all her time on implementation of the program.

"I would hope that coming in she doesn't get buried in this Excelsior scholarship thing that she can do very little about at this point," she said.

Academic politics.

The leader of SUNY must be able to walk a fine political line, Marcus said. "SUNY leadership is a very tough job. It's a very political job, too," she said.

To be successful, Johnson will have to nurture a positive relationship with the Republican-led Senate, the Democratic-led Assembly and a Democratic governor, said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz. "New York is a very partisan state with a divided Legislature, so that's an added challenge," he said.

That relationship will be particularly important as Johnson seeks funding for the system and begins to propose initiatives requiring legislation.

Experience with the Obama administration should help, but much will depend on her relationship with Cuomo.

"The governor tends to be in an activist mode toward higher education at the moment. That can be nice in terms of support, but also challenging in terms of who sets the agenda," Marcus said.

The fight for resources.

One of the most difficult challenges will be financial, Benjamin said.

"The system is challenged to find enough resources to perform its mission," he said. "Many institutions are squeezed financially."

The system, like others around the country, has faced declines in state direct operating aid and increased costs. Some upstate schools also face declining enrollment due to population decreases.

The 2017-18 state budget included \$7.5 billion in total support for higher education, a \$448

million increase over 2016-17 spending, according to the budget division.

Johnson's background could help bring in research grant dollars and potentially make connections with the nonprofit and business sectors.

But the state has yet to settle labor contracts, although the budget includes a maintenance of effort to cover certain mandatory year-to-year cost increases such as collective bargaining. A 1 percent increase in salaries, as negotiated with the unions by the state, would translate to an increase of approximately \$20 million annually, SUNY has said.

And while tuition is covered for some students, the budget also provided SUNY the opportunity to raise tuition by up to \$200 annually — a decision the board will likely make at its next meeting.

“SUNY has been underfunded for a variety of reasons and has had to deal with scarce resources while at the same time I’ve had the impression that the academic mission has been de-emphasized,” Kowal said, adding that he hopes Johnson will change that.

The state also is facing potential federal cuts to higher education, although Johnson’s federal background and her energy background may help mitigate those cuts.

SUNY could increase its efforts to pursue green-energy and tech-development initiatives, Kowal said. “If there’s anyone who can do it, it’s someone who has been involved at the federal level and with Congress and the relevant department to get that funding.”

A win for STEM, and women.

Johnson’s appointment comes as the nation is becoming even more dependent on highly skilled and educated workers, said Martha Kanter, executive director of the national College Promise Campaign and senior fellow at the Steinhardt Institute.

Zimpher, the outgoing chancellor, laid the groundwork for so-called cradle-to-career initiatives to prepare students for the workforce.

“I think she’ll build on all that work to look at how we can really advance this forward,” Kanter said. Johnson also has insight into what the work force may need going forward, she said

Johnson’s background aligns with work force development and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) initiatives already in place at SUNY and in the state under Cuomo.

“She’s got a great deal of experience working cross-sector,” board trustee Stan Litow said.

Those cross-sector ties could help increase applied learning experiences.

A crucial factor will be whether Johnson is able to build up STEM while maintaining other programs and philosophies, such as teacher training initiatives and the humanities.

Being the second female leader of SUNY and a scientist also makes her a role model, inspiring students and other women to pursue leadership roles, Kanter said.

Overall Johnson sounds like she’s starting from a good place.

“She’s distinguished. She has very solid academic credentials, including as provost and as a very successful engineering dean. She had a main role in the Obama administration,” Benjamin said.

She’s also the “right age,” he said, “a mature person but still with much of her career ahead of her, so it’s a very promising appointment.”