

POLITICO Pro Q&A: New SUNY Chancellor Jim Malatras

By Nick Niedzwiadek

Jim Malatras is the new chancellor of the State University of New York, a sprawling 64-campus system that includes community colleges, medical centers and traditional four-year schools.

Malatras, who served as president of Empire State College for about a year prior to his appointment as chancellor, spoke with POLITICO about some of his ideas for SUNY, what he hopes to accomplish and how he'll try to reassure skeptics who were critical of the quick selection process.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Obviously reopening campuses and keeping everyone safe during a pandemic is job one. But what other concerns do you have?

I think access to quality is an important issue, especially for some of our more marginalized communities. I think we have to present those opportunities, whether it is expanding things like the [Educational] Opportunity Program or locating some of our key academic services in their communities. For instance, the [Northland Workforce Training Center in Buffalo](#) is a model, or the Syracuse center that was just [passed in the budget](#).

I think trying to get other segments of our society that may not have traditionally been given a chance at college, whether it's [individuals with autism](#), or others that we have been working with at Empire State College, is enormously important for the long-term sustainability of the college system. It also has important social value for public higher education because education has a larger social mission, as well.

Many colleges and universities all across the country are facing financial challenges. It was happening before the pandemic, and the pandemic exacerbated this problem. But those trends have been ongoing for the past several years because of declining enrollment. So I think in many ways we have to take the core strengths and leveraging in a way that provides absolute value to our students.

What should the SUNY system should look like in 5, 10, 20 years?

I don't know yet. In talking to some of the college presidents in the SUNY system, we're looking for new ways of collaborating. In the end, we're one system.

I look at the [SUNY] system as a federalist system of government. The federal government and states are each their own. They have their own powers. We have campuses that are their own self-sustaining things. They have their own institutional, cultural and educational values. How do you leverage those things in a net-positive way, bring out those things and show students that they have value?

There has been some criticism of the way that you were appointed. What's your plan to try to mend those fences, or get people on board and build trust?

We have a shared system of governance at SUNY, and I appreciate that because I think collaboration and working together ultimately gives you a better product that everybody has bought into the vision. Even if it's difficult, even if not everybody agrees. It's good to have everybody rowing in the same direction.

I'm going to engage everyone, not just the leadership of different parts of the community, but anyone I can run into and talk to. You get a lot of value by doing a lot of engagement, reaching out to people. It's kind of a little harder during a pandemic, but I think that type of engagement and working together is what I plan on doing, like I did with Empire State College.

And then moving forward, the only thing I ask people is that we stay student-centric and student-focused.

And as long as that is the rules of the road, I think we could do a lot of big things. Again I get where people come from. I understand people's apprehension on certain processes.

Many people want firm commitments and not just words when it comes to campus diversity and inclusion. How will you demonstrate your commitment to these types of values?

I think words do have meaning, and they do have value, and they do shape culture, and they can change hearts and minds if you approach it a different way. But words alone are not enough.

I think my record at Empire demonstrates that I did put both [words and action] together. Forty-two percent of all of my faculty hires were of color. I created a task force [on diversity]. Empire didn't have an opportunity program — which I thought was just crazy on some levels, especially with the broad cross section of students that we serve all across the state, the nation and the globe — and we put that into action right away.

During the height of the Covid-19 crisis, you were working double duty [helping the governor](#) while also serving as a college president. Given how much more will now be on your plate as chancellor, would you have to say no to the governor if he does ask for a hand on issues, especially if they're not directly related to SUNY?

I think it's all hands on deck in this unprecedented time. A lot of people stepped up all across the state to help during Covid. My singular focus is to the students of the State University of New York system, and there is a lot of work to be done there. And I hope to participate on the Covid task force, especially when it comes to educational issues, because I think they're really important to our students and the families of our students.

I can't answer these hypothetical questions, but I think the way I'm going to come at this job is like the way I came at my [Empire State College] job, which is with a singular focus on my students. That's not going to change with this job either.

Colleges across the country have brought back students only to have outbreaks that quickly disrupt plans. Is there any immediate takeaway for colleges in the SUNY system?

The plans have to be smartly developed. That's the first step. Plans have to be in place, but if people aren't complying with the plans, if people have not bought into that approach. If they're not complying with the rules, you are going to have problems.

But I think if you can keep people complying with the rules, following the stricter guidelines that we have in this state, we could keep this to be a more limited thing.

Fast forward five years, what do you want the system to be doing or have done in that period?

I would love to see enrollment up in a new and innovative way. It's not going to be ... 'I go to a college for a finite amount of time, and then I get my degree and I go into the workforce.'

I think a type of hybrid learning approach is going to be more of a model. I think more colleges are going to be offering individual classes where you would still be a student in one college, but you can still participate in classes within the SUNY system and other parts of the campus community, which I think will only enhance the value of a person's degree.

And I think I would love to see more integrated services, the community-based provision of services in those communities that need educational opportunities the most.

We'll have to strengthen the core institutions that we have within the system, but they'll have to give a little up and say "we can work together." And do it in a way that does not eliminate or change the institutional culture of an individual campus but broadens a student's experience. That will ultimately help everyone within SUNY get more enrollment, have better student experiences and more successful students in new careers upon graduation. I would look at that as success.

Other college systems are beefing up their online footprint, which both lets you recruit out of state, but also lets you have the economy of scale. Is that something that SUNY should pursue? Because it is still a very New York-centric institution.

The real issue is, how do you leverage the vast network of SUNY into a cohesive piece that you can show to the world? I think our biggest challenge right now are the outside competitors that aren't always public higher education either, right? There's often for-profits or others that come in, they have a lot of marketing capability. They have a lot of ability to get people enrolled quickly.

Many of our enrollment issues are students in New York going to other places. How do you get those students back and say to those students the best path you could have in life would be to go through one of our SUNY programs or multiple SUNY programs over the course of time.

It's up to us to demonstrate that value. We have to be more innovative, nimble and adaptable to sort of capture some of those students and get them back