

From research to reality

SUNY New Paltz center to focus on local problems. PAGE 5

REGION



Gerald Benjamin is the new director of the regional research center at SUNY Paltz. It will involve itself with local economic and planning issues. Benjamin says it has always seemed a "missed opportunity" not to have a regional center in the state's biggest growth area.

Making research work for us

SUNY dean's new gig: solving problems

BY JEREMIAH HARRIGAN
Times Herald-Record

NEW PALTZ — You could be forgiven for thinking Gerald Benjamin was an ivory-tower academic with little or no relation to the workaday world most of us live in.

Benjamin has spent the past 12 years as dean of SUNY New Paltz's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which would seem to impugn his regular-guydom. But anyone who knows him knows better: He's also spent a dozen years in the rough-and-tumble world of Ulster County politics, including stints as Republican Party majority leader and later chairman of the county Legislature.

So, when Benjamin talks about his latest project — a research center focused on bringing the resources of the academy to bear on local and regional economic and governmental needs — he knows whereof he speaks.

Benjamin is the new director of SUNY New Paltz's awkwardly named new Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, whose mandate will be to make the college's vast resources available for local and regional economic and governmental needs.

If that sounds a bit academic, consider this: Benjamin is fascinated by everyday problems folks read about but may not think to question.

"Are we getting, for example, the biggest bang for our buck

"The idea is to apply research to foster the best and most efficient practices and hold governments accountable."

GERALD BENJAMIN

Director, Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, SUNY New Paltz

by building new highways? Or what about the efficiency of making deadbeat dads pay? The idea is to apply research to foster the best and most efficient practices and hold governments accountable," he said.

These concepts — twinning bangs and bucks, calling for efficiency and accountability — are the bread-and-butter concepts you'll hear invoked by all political parties. But if these are comfortable phrases for people on the stump, they're something more to Benjamin: They're long-standing problems that won't be solved by a single election. They're the very reason for the center's nonpartisan existence.

Benjamin says it's always seemed to him to be a "missed opportunity" not to have a regional center in the state's biggest growth area.

He found a receptive ear for his feelings in SUNY New Paltz President Steven Poskanzer.

ABOUT GERALD BENJAMIN

Gerald Benjamin joined the faculty of SUNY New Paltz's political science department in 1968. He's received the New York State/United University Professors Excellence Award. He was a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Tokyo and the Japanese Foreign Ministry School.

Benjamin has been involved in major efforts to reform New York state, city and local government, including drafting and proposing the first charter in Ulster County.

He's held other positions, including director of the Center for New York State and Local Government Studies at SUNY's Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany; research director of New York's Temporary State Commission on Constitutional Revision; and principal research adviser to the New York City Charter Revision Commission.

He's written and edited 14 books or monographs and numerous government reports and articles, most on state and local government in New York.

They discussed establishing a center, and it was Poskanzer who said Benjamin should be the center's director.

The job becomes full time in mid-July. Initially, the center will have a staff of four and a budget of about \$250,000.

An animated and engaging speaker under any circumstance, Benjamin grows even more enthusiastic as he outlines possible targets for further ex-

amination. Not only hot-button issues like property taxes and jobs and economic development but their likely consequences and the interrelatedness of those consequences.

He seems unable to sound a cynical note. Issues abound. So do answers. Finding them will be the way his research center will ultimately be judged.

jharrigan@th-record.com