SUNY: Losing Millions in Funding

Despite cuts in state funds, college moving ahead with $120 million plan to expand and upgrade its science facilities

By Ken Little

SUNY Oswego officials believe an effective response to uncertain economic times is to provide the kinds of educational opportunities needed for recovery.

As with most other institutions of higher learning, the additional challenge is to secure adequate operating expenses from ever-shifting pieces of the funding puzzle.

As a result, students at SUNY Oswego and those who want to study there are sometimes obliged to navigate a winding path to Glimmerglass Lagoon.

For the most part, the college is holding its own and maintaining high academic standards during the economic downturn, SUNY Oswego President Deborah F. Stanley said.

"Right now, SUNY colleges are their regions' bootstraps and we've got to keep them intact and sturdy," Stanley said in a prepared statement.

"Millions In Cuts"—"At Oswego we've faced millions in cuts in the past 10 months and we are facing the prospect of millions more. It would help greatly if we could simply apply all of our tuition revenues to meet the educational needs of our students," Stanley said. "We are working with our legislators now to see if we can win the battle to keep all the tuition that our students pay to us on our campus in the coming year."

SUNY Oswego has cut back on personnel and other expenses "strategically," Stanley said, while "protecting the quality of our academic enterprise as our guiding principle."

Stanley said the college continues efforts to identify additional revenue sources. Donors, grants, contracts, entrepreneurial ventures, the federal stimulus package and bonding for capital projects are all in play.

"We're seeing where we can find additional funds outside the state," college spokeswoman Julie Blissert said.

The college has reached out to students in other ways by expanding its range. The SUNY Oswego Metro Center opened in December in downtown Syracuse. The facility offers a variety of courses, including an MBA program, graduate courses in education and the liberal arts, customized and contract training and small business consulting.

More students than ever want to go to SUNY Oswego, if undergraduate applications are an indication. First-time, full-time students applying to the college numbered 9,985 for fall 2008. That's 650 more than fall 2007 and a 34.2 percent increase since 2003, according to SUNY Oswego's student affairs and enrollment management division. Only 48 percent of the applicants who applied to SUNY Oswego for the current academic year were accepted, down from 57 percent five years ago.

"The skilled talent necessary for recovery will come out of our colleges, and more than ever, from the public colleges that today's students can afford," Stanley said. "At Oswego, our applications have been trending upward significantly for several years, but, given the economy, demand for education and retraining may be about to accelerate steeply."

The number of students who want to transfer to SUNY Oswego this fall from other schools is up 20 percent from 2008, Stanley said.

Student Perspective—Those who make it and become part of the approximately 8,200 full-time student body at SUNY Oswego are also very mindful of the economy.

"This past fall when they were talking about the tuition increase, I talked with students who said with the increase they would not be able to go back. Most of them did, but I'm sure there were students who were unable to come back," said Daniel Nau, SUNY Oswego student association president.
Obtaining assistance from the Tuition Assistance Program helps in some cases, but Nau said students, particularly those from lower-income families, are challenged to make ends meet.

“The general feeling I’m getting is that people are not so outraged about the tuition increase. It’s that 90 percent of the tuition increase is not coming back to the institutions,” Nau said. “The vast, vast majority of students said they would rather pay more tuition and have it stay here on campus than pay less and have it go into the state coffers.”

Increased enrollment at SUNY and City University of New York schools has not been matched by a corresponding increase in state funding, said David Dyssegaard Kallick, senior fellow of the Fiscal Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research and education organization focusing on tax, budget and public policy issues in New York.

“Next year’s classes at SUNY and CUNY are expected to be larger than ever,” Kallick said. “Yet, rather than expand funding to an already overstressed system, the state budget proposal recommends a decrease in support for higher public education. That’s not a smart economic strategy, and it’s not good stewardship of two of the country’s great systems of public education.”

The state Legislature in February reached agreement with Gov. David Paterson to fill a $1.6 billion budget gap in the fiscal year that ended March 31. Part of the agreement involves reducing SUNY operating funds by 90 percent of what is collected from a $620-per-year tuition increase for the spring semester. Savings will total $62 million, with a net savings of $53 million after the new rate is factored into TAP assistance.

Nau said SUNY Oswego has lost over $2.5 million in state funding between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 fiscal years.

“It changes almost daily to try to figure out what money we have. The cuts kept on coming and the tuition increase was actually another cut. They said, ‘We’re going to take 90 percent,’ but it is actually 110 percent,” Blissert said.

Lobbying efforts continue in Albany to help ensure the SUNY system receives adequate funding.

An important means of maintaining a productive economy in an economic downturn while preparing for a growing middle class in the eventual recovery is to upgrade the education and skills of workers, said James Parrott, deputy director and chief economist of the Fiscal Policy Institute.

“In this economy, people are flocking to CUNY and SUNY. The state should be doing everything it can to support them. We should be investing in a better-educated workforce,” Parrott said. “Instead, the governor’s current budget proposal is to cut funding as the economy sours. It would be better economics to maintain services, and make up for decreased revenues by restoring progressivity to the state income tax.”

Capital Projects A Plus—Despite the moribund economy, SUNY Oswego is forging ahead with a series of capital projects that provide construction jobs to local workers and make the campus more attractive to prospective students.

Stanley said the college has embarked on a $120 million plan to expand and upgrade its science facilities. Other plans call for the replacement of Snygg Hall and the enlargement of Piez Hall. Also, a new $40 million townhouse residential village for juniors and seniors near Glimmerglass Lagoon is under construction and slated to open in fall 2010. Recent facility investments at SUNY Oswego total about $250 million.

“We really have an exciting environment with all the construction here in the last 10 years,” Blissert said.

The college began the year committed to between 25 and 30 searches for new faculty members.

“We canceled 15 or 20 of them and we’re proceeding with 11 searches,” Blissert said. Some positions will be filled on a temporary or part-time basis, she said.

Sabbaticals for professors, typically provided every six or seven years, are cancelled for the upcoming academic year, Blissert said.

In many cases, SUNY Oswego will make do with the physical materials it has.

“Equipment replacement funds have been cut way back,” Blissert said.

“We want to improve the level of service and at the same time we have to deal with the cuts we are facing from the state and manage the cuts in a way that will not hurt the people we serve in the region.”

Economic Trends

Special Article

Are We The Next Greatest Generation?

Last Page

Choosing a Business Partner

Healthcare Briefs

Good Bye Lee Memorial

CNY Hospitals: Watching Every Dollar Spent

Number of Organ Transplants Jumps in New York State’

Q&A With Ann Gilpin

Men’s Top 5 Preventable Killers

Health Care Briefs

Where Are They Now

Where Are They Now?
New programs added at SUNY Oswego include software engineering and gerontology. The college also created the School of Communication, Media and the Arts. Stanley said the college is also putting “finishing touches” on programs in electrical and computer engineering and risk management – “all programs businesses in Central New York have asked for and fields we know there will be jobs for our graduates.”

Nau thinks college officials are doing what they can to keep standards high at SUNY Oswego.

“I’ve seen them do quite an excellent job both here and at the state level. They’ve tried to put the least burden possible (on students),” Nau said. “I am not satisfied at all with the state’s response. I understand the difficult economic times we are in and that we have to get the money somewhere, but I am not satisfied with the way they are doing it. They are taking money from the state institutions.”

SUNY Oswego officials have said that the college’s broad range of academic offerings and strong merit scholarship programs are two factors driving increased applications to the school. The college has also developed a reputation as a campus on the move.

All these factors may help SUNY Oswego and the close-knit community surrounding it better weather the economic downturn.