

## SUNY tuition hike faces fight over rising student debt

By Joseph Spector

Albany Bureau



State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher watches a video before delivering the State of the University address on Monday in Albany. (Photo: AP)

ALBANY NY - SUNY is vowing to press forward with potentially another five years of tuition increases, and it picked up a key endorsement: Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Cuomo in his state budget proposal Wednesday endorsed the SUNY 2020 plan, which would allow SUNY to charge up to \$300 a year in higher tuition over the next five years. The program was first installed in 2011, and SUNY tuition has increased 30 percent, or \$1,500 over that span.

Cuomo said in addition to investing \$6.9 billion in SUNY and the city university system, "I also propose extending our highly successful SUNY and CUNY 2020 rational tuition and challenge grant program. Our goal is to make our public higher education system the envy of the country. I know we can."

State lawmakers are vowing to fight another series of \$300-a-year tuition increases for the 64-campus, saying they are concerned about growing student debt.

Tuition was \$6,470 a year for incoming freshmen this past fall.

"Rising tuition costs threaten to make a college education out of reach for too many New Yorkers," Assemblywoman Carrier Woerner, D-Round Lake, Saratoga County, said in a statement. "We must invest in our students and ensure that SUNY schools remain an affordable option so that our children have the opportunity to achieve a higher education without being burdened with crushing debt after they graduate."

SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher and college presidents are lobbying for the extension of the SUNY 2020 plan, which expires this year. They said the program brings predictability to tuition increases. Before, the state Legislature would agree sporadically to increase tuition, making it difficult for the schools and the students to plan, they said.

"I applaud the governor's willingness to keep tuition-setting authority with the SUNY Board of Trustees and for ensuring — as our students requested — that additional tuition dollars will be spent solely on improving education," Zimpher said in a statement.

Zimpher, in her State of the University address on Jan. 11, [said SUNY tuition remains](#) the lowest for public colleges in the Northeast.

College presidents also pressed for the extension of the program.

Denise Battles, president of SUNY Geneseo, said, "Before the program, tuition would remain flat for long periods with dramatic increases following state budget cuts. It benefits students as they plan their future as well as campuses as they continually focus on student success."

The state Legislature will consider whether to approve the program during budget negotiations for the fiscal year that starts April 1.

Purchase College president Thomas Schwarz said, "It is our responsibility to provide access to an affordable and high-quality education, and this legislation is an important step toward reaching that goal."

SUNY Brockport president Heidi Macpherson also backed SUNY 2020 as a "rational tuition plan."

"It is important that families can plan for the cost of a college education confidently and it is important for SUNY campuses to invest in the faculty and programs that provide our students with the best possible education," she said in a statement.

Binghamton University President Harvey Stenger said the program has helped the university hire staff and fund programs, saying it has “allowed Binghamton to expand both academically and physically.”

“NYSUNY2020 replaced an era of sudden tuition increases with a system that is predictable and empowers students and parents to plan ahead for college expenses. As a result of the original NYSUNY 2020 funding, we have hired faculty, expanded academic programs and increased our enrollment,” he said in a statement.

Some lawmakers have said they may consider a SUNY 2020 program that is for fewer years and less than \$300 a year.

Zimpher was also knocked by some lawmakers for her own compensation package.

Zimpher received a 3 percent raise in July, bringing her total salary to \$504,700. She also received a nearly 7 percent increase in an annual housing allowance, from \$90,000 to \$96,000, [Gannett's Albany Bureau reported last month](#).

“Those who have graduated college or have a family member in college have seen the staggering debt that a student accumulates during higher education,” Assemblyman James Skoufis, D-Woodbury, Orange County, said in a statement. “Allowing tuition to rise 30 percent in the last five years as administrators increase their salaries and housing allowances is an unconscionable act.”

*Joseph Spector: [jspector@gannett.com](mailto:jspector@gannett.com); Twitter: [@gannettalbany](https://twitter.com/gannettalbany)*