Committed to Collaboration

SUNY System Chancellor Nancy Zimpher wants everyone to get out of their silos and work together to fix higher education

By Richard Jackoway
All photos courtesy of SUNY

The idea behind collective impact is getting all the players together, which has been done a lot, but then for them to focus on a few achievable goals.

“We are program rich and system poor. We have all kinds of programs, but they are bumping into each other. They are a thousand points of light. They are atoms in the stratosphere,” she says. “What we need is to have more communities working collectively.”

So she regularly leaves SUNY’s Albany headquarters to meet with business leaders, politicians, K-12 educators, parents — even students — and comes back with what she calls “big, hairy, audacious goals” that just might change how education works in America.

“You agree as a group, these three things are the things we are going to do. We aren’t going to do the 28 other things that someone wants to do but has no evidence [that they work].” Then you track whether or not you’ve gotten to where you need to go.

As part of this effort, SUNY’s Office of Pipeline Programs has been developing partnerships with K-12 schools throughout New York. Part of the program is the establishment of the nation’s first Cradle to Career Alliance, which is developing literacy centers.

As a system with community colleges and universities combined, SUNY can tailor the partnership to fulfill different missions.

In the critical STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, for instance, the alliance is advancing workforce development programs at its community colleges, while 10 SUNY universities have signed on to the Master Teacher...
program, which will help teachers in grades 6 to 12 implement best practices in STEM education.

Regarding using data to track results, here Zimpher is in agreement with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who has said, “I am a deep believer in the power of data to drive our decisions. Data gives us the roadmap to reform.”

Up from the Ozarks
Even the cynics, who have seen education fashion come and go, are compelled to listen to Zimpher, who is not only an engaging and articulate spokesperson, but has literally done it all.

But to clear up one thing, Zimpher didn’t start her career as a teacher at a one-room schoolhouse in the Ozarks, as is commonly reported — the school actually had two rooms.

Along the way, she accumulated an impressive resume. She moved from the Ozarks to become a dean and professor of education at The Ohio State University, where she earned her bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees.

In 1998 she became the first female chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. From there she moved to the University of Cincinnati, where she was that school’s first female president.

In 2009, she was named the 12th chancellor of the SUNY system. And yes, she was the first woman to hold that position as well.

She has also been a prolific author (the aptly titled A Time for Boldness is one of the books she co-wrote), and she co-founded StriveTogether, another community-based, Cradle to Career collaborative. She was chair of CEOs for Cities and led the national Coalition of Urban Serving Universities as well.

Diversity Is a Priority
From 2012-2014, Zimpher led SUNY to become the first, and still the only, university system honored with INSIGHT Into Diversity’s Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award. It’s clear
that diversity and inclusion are top priorities for all the SUNY schools.

She says a commitment to diversity begins with leadership from the top, meaning the university’s 18-member Board of Trustees.

“I don’t think you can move the dial in diversity unless you have high-level institutional commitment, and I think that starts at the top where the chancellor or president lives,” she says. “I think our vast minions of faculty, staff, and students have to hear that this is a personal and institutional commitment.”

SUNY got that message and memorialized it five years ago in the Power of SUNY strategic plan.

“Our Board of Trustees has made diversity at every level a priority. They want more presidents of color. They want more faculty of color. They want more central administrators of color.”

After that commitment came implementation, and decisions on how that change would happen were not always easy.

“We had a dilemma. Should we assign all of our commitments to diversity to one bucket, or should we try to distribute the commitment to diversity to everybody? We chose the latter. We chose to not have diversity be one section’s responsibility, but to have it be everybody’s,” Zimpher says.

“Sometimes when you have a chief diversity officer and a chief diversity office, everybody says, ‘Let Mikey do it.’ What I wanted to see us say is, ‘No. No. No. Of course we are going to have a diversity officer. Of course we are going to have a diversity office. But we are all going to take responsibility.’”

The chief diversity officer for the system is Carlos Medina, who welcomes the multi-faceted approach.

“It’s new, and it’s really working,” Medina says. “The five-year SUNY plan has really done a lot to ensure that the leadership gets diversity and is responsible for moving the dial.”

Part of the plan is to make sure that the administration and faculty are diverse and inclusive, which isn’t always easy. So SUNY has developed a program for recruiting diverse presidential candidates even before they are ready in their careers to be college presidents.

“We bring people to New York for a week for a retreat to show them what SUNY is about. So when they decide that they are ready for a presidency, they will look at SUNY. Because it’s a very competitive market,” Zimpher says.

To help recruit and retain more faculty of color, SUNY has implemented a Faculty Diversity Program. According to the SUNY policy, campuses can receive a percentage of the faculty member’s salary (80 percent in the first year and declining from there) for three years.

But with 35,000 faculty members, it’s difficult to make a big impact on overall diversity numbers.

A Sampling of SUNY Diversity Efforts

Heading up SUNY’s diversity efforts is Carlos Medina, the chief diversity officer and senior associate vice chancellor for diversity, equity, and inclusion for the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

The Office’s Mission and Vision Statement calls on SUNY to be “a preeminent public university that is truly representative of the rich array of human and intellectual diversity that is the hallmark of New York State.”

To accomplish this, Medina has spearheaded a wide array of diversity programs and helped expand successful campus-specific programs to the SUNY system as a whole. Last year, he received an INSIGHT Into Diversity Visionary Award for his efforts.

Here are some examples of SUNY’s diversity programs:

**The Graduate Diversity Fellowship Program**

A SUNY-wide initiative that offers fellowships to students who have been admitted to graduate or professional study, the program is intended to assist in the recruitment, enrollment, and retention of students in doctoral and master’s level programs who can demonstrate that they contribute to the diversity of the student body, especially those who can show that they have overcome a disadvantage or other impediment to success in higher education.

**The Empire State Diversity Honors Scholarship Program**

A state-wide undergraduate scholarship program for students from a broad range of backgrounds who contribute to the diversity of the student body in their campus or academic program. Eligible students must be enrolled in a degree program and have demonstrated high academic achievement characteristic of an honors program.

**The Native American Initiative**

Part of a consortium of post-secondary institutions in northern and western New York State, which have come together to provide programs that address the specific educational needs of Native American students. SUNY’s support of the NAI funds programming at two campus locations — Fredonia and Potsdam.
“It’s working very well,” Medina says. “But I have to be honest. It’s a small effort because it’s expensive. We actually hire six or seven new faculty under this program a year. But I’m of the mind that even one good faculty member has a huge impact.”

**Bridging the Gap Between K-12 and Higher Education**

Diversifying SUNY’s student body and making sure that it excels is a key goal of Zimpher’s as well as one that has her again looking outside of the system’s boundaries.

“We have a goal of sealing the leaks in the education pipeline from cradle to career. I think sometimes people forget that’s the most ambitious effort at diversity there is, because you can’t get diversity unless you have educational equality.

“We are losing way too many people who are low-income and disproportionately people of color because they are falling out of the education pipeline,” she says.

One of the keys, she says, is to better coordinate K-12 and higher education. Actually, forget better coordinate. To coordinate at all would be a good first step, in her opinion.

“There are very few elements in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act that bind us together. There is one little thin straw in Title II, I think it is on teacher education, and that’s a weak link,” she says.

So as Congress begins debating the reauthorization of the HEA this term, Zimpher has some advice: “The one thing I would put my money on is incentivizing closer ties between K-12 and higher education.”

Unifying how education operates is such a simple idea that Zimpher says most non-educators are unaware that it isn’t happening already.

“The child, from cradle to career, does not recognize the great divide between K-12 policy and higher ed policy. They sort of think we are all in this together,” she says. “But that’s not the way we make federal policy.”

Despite its simple logic, connecting K-12 to higher education is a “big, hairy, and audacious” goal because education has never worked that way in America. It would take getting buy-in from a wide variety of people and having them break out of their usual way of doing things to collaborate collectively.

Zimpher has many ideas of how that can be done. You just have to leave your silo behind.

Richard Jackoway is the editor of INSIGHT Into Diversity. To learn more about the INSIGHT Into Diversity Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award, visit insightintodiversity.com.