

Averted \$4.2M Ax by State *PSC Says Its Campaign Headed Off CUNY Cuts*

By DAVID SIMS

The state's first significant budget-reduction plan was passed Feb. 3 without Governor Paterson's proposed cuts of 10 percent to City University of New York community colleges, and Professional Staff Congress President Barbara Bowen credited her union's campaign and a public outcry on the issue.

The cuts, which covered the state fiscal year ending March 31, would have reduced support to CUNY community colleges by 10 percent in base aid per full-time equivalent student (with two part-time students counting as one full-time). "That is the main form of state support, overwhelmingly," said Ms. Bowen in a phone interview. "The total [cuts] for the CUNY community colleges would have been \$4.2 million, and that was to be imposed between now and April 1, which would have concentrated the cut."

'Produced An Outcry'

After the Governor announced the planned winter cutbacks, the PSC and New York State United Teachers mobilized to protest the cuts in Albany, with demonstrations, a letter-writing campaign and testimony before the Legislature in budget hearings. Lawmakers and the Governor last week agreed on \$1.6 billion in savings from other sources.

"There was an outcry against the proposal, which I called in my testimony 'probably the worst public policy idea I've heard in the discussion,'" said Ms. Bowen. "The faculty and the staff and the community were actively engaged. Scores of our faculty went up to Albany, we met with legislators, and there was a statewide effort coordinated by NYSUT."

PSC members wrote 9,000 letters to Albany protesting the community college cuts, with 55,000 more postcards protesting all CUNY cuts being sent to the Governor at the same time. But Ms. Bowen posited that the true tipping point may have been the state's spiraling economy.

"Community college enrollment is soaring," she said. "People are flood-

ing into them as they seek to retrain for a different job, or families who might before have paid for four years of senior college tuition are thinking 'maybe I'll save some money,' people who might in the past have gone to private colleges and taken on debt feel unwilling and unable to do so."

'Why Cut What's Growing?'

"These are critical resources at a time of economic restriction, and it makes no sense economically to cut community colleges at exactly the moment that their enrollment is soaring, and when they're most needed," she continued. The PSC pointed to a report by the Fiscal Policy Institute that said that state aid for CUNY commu-

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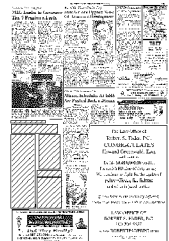
nity colleges had fallen by 26 percent since the early 1990s, even though enrollment steadily increased.

Ms. Bowen said that the union had also pointed to the ethnic makeup of CUNY community colleges to prove their vitality. "I think people recognize that maintaining support for community colleges is a civil rights issue," she said. "Eighty percent of CUNY community college students are African-American, Latino or Asian. Part of the reason that we were able to swing the feeling in Albany was that the Legislature did recognize that education is a right, and that 10-percent cuts would have kneecapped these colleges."

The union credited Albany's two higher-education committee chairs, Deborah Glick of Manhattan in the State Assembly and Toby Ann Stavisky of Queens in the State Senate, with Ms. Bowen saying they had been "especially vigorous" in lobbying to remove the cuts.

Bigger Fight Ahead

In the coming six weeks, the PSC will face bigger battles over the next fiscal year's budget, which threatens to be even more bruising to the state and city universities. Ms. Bowen, who acknowledged that her members were



only breathing “a partial sigh of relief,” said that she hoped the State Legislature’s move last week signaled a sea change in Albany.

“What the state should be doing at this moment is investing more in public higher education, and I really think that the pendulum is beginning to swing in Albany toward a revenue solution,” she said. “There’s beginning to be a widespread recognition that you can’t cut your way out of a recession ... what I would like to see is the beginning of a solution for the state budget based on increasing revenue in a fair way, from those most able to afford it, in a way that would stimulate the economy, rather than approach that with cuts.”



BARBARA BOWEN: ‘Averted a CUNY kneecapping.’

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