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John B. Simpson, president of the U. at Buffalo, visits a campus building project. The university needs 1,000 more faculty members, he says, to raise its profile to the level of flagships like Ohio State.

By Scott Carlson

Buffalo, N.Y.

People who talk with John B. Simpson about UB2020, the plan to revitalize the State University of New York's Buffalo campus, along with Buffalo itself, will eventually hear the Seattle story.

It goes like this: Mr. Simpson, a young professor of psychology in 1975, landed a job at the University of Washington. Thrilled to be employed, he recalls, he packed up his belongings and drove his wife, two kids, and dog to the city, where they were met by a sign: "Will the last person leaving Seattle—turn out the lights." The sign was a response to 60,000 layoffs at Boeing, which had turned the city into what one journalist at the time called "a vast pawnshop," as people shed their belongings and got out of town.

In the decades since, of course, Seattle has become the home of world-dominating technology companies and leading biomedical firms, not to mention Starbucks. "I ask people why this happened, and the answer almost always is that it's the University of Washington," says Mr. Simpson.

Mr. Simpson's story may be more legend than history—the now-famous billboard was displayed for only two weeks in 1971—but it effectively imparts his lesson for the University at Buffalo, where he is president: A vibrant, entrepreneurial, ambitious, first-class

university can lift up an entire region, even one as downtrodden as Western New York, one of the poorest areas in the country. In doing so, Buffalo could follow the "eds and meds" model that has buoyed postindustrial cities like Raleigh, N.C.; Pittsburgh; Philadelphia; and Baltimore.

The problem is that the University at Buffalo is not vibrant, has not traditionally been entrepreneurial, and is most certainly not first-class.



Photographs by Sarah Weeden for The Chronicle

Robert G. Shibley, an architecture professor at Buffalo, in a former factory being renovated by the university. "It is our ecological responsibility to grow here," he says of a city that a century ago was one of America's richest, with extensive infrastructure and world-class buildings. "This is a city of tremendous bones."



Shannon DeCelle for The Chronicle

Phillip H. Smith, president of the SUNY faculty-and-staff union, says the U. at Buffalo's restructuring proposal "would be implemented through a process of basically destroying the university."

But with UB2020, the university is ambitious—or aggressive, depending on your point of view. The plan is an expansive effort to map out what the campus will look like in decades to come, eventually with 10,000 more students, 1,000 more faculty members, seven million more square feet of space, and a doubling of the university's current \$1.7-billion economic impact on the region. This year, when many universities are halting construction projects, Buffalo is pushing ahead with \$362-million in new construction, all part of the UB2020 plan.

The University at Buffalo, with its 28,000 students and nearly \$348-million in annual research-and-development spending, has long operated in the shadow of New York's

premier private institutions: Columbia, Cornell, and New York Universities, and the University of Rochester.

UB2020 counts on the passage of a bill, now in the New York State Assembly, that would free the university from state regulations that Mr. Simpson and others here believe have foiled its growth and achievement over the decades. He wants the plan and the legislation, which have support from local development agencies and public figures, to fire up the university's ability to raise money—as well as its profile—from private donations, higher tuition, and public-private financing deals. UB2020 would essentially begin to create tiers in a state system that has been unusually egalitarian—"a socialistic enterprise," as Mr. Simpson puts it.

"Things are sort of passed out to everyone, and everyone is made happy and whole at a certain level, rather than make something truly fine and great," he says. "What we are trying to do is chafe at that status quo. ... The status quo is what has put this university in a long, slow, downward trajectory."

Certainly people have chafed—not least other SUNY campus leaders, who want such changes for their institutions, too, and fear being left behind. Others believe the plan will make Buffalo less accessible to lower-income students and open the door to mischief with state resources. "The UB2020 plan would be implemented through a process of basically destroying the university," says Phillip H. Smith, president of United University Professions, a union that represents faculty and staff members in the state system. What would be destroyed as the University at Buffalo aspires to a loftier status, he argues, is its vital accessibility to average New Yorkers.

UB2020 "seeks to create a private university within the state university," says Deborah J. Glick, a Manhattan Democrat who chairs the Assembly's higher-education committee. "The UB2020 proposal has many dramatic changes that I think doing all at once—and maybe doing some at all—are inappropriate."

Evidence of Neglect

It's clear from a visit to the University at Buffalo that whatever state legislators or the SUNY system has done so far has not worked. The university's North Campus, in suburban Amherst, exudes mediocrity, conveying the feeling that no one has invested in this place, in part perhaps because no one on the campus had a sense of control. The drab brick buildings and the disrepair evident everywhere are the first signals.

In 2004, when Mr. Simpson arrived from the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he was executive vice chancellor and provost, he brought a number of California administrators with him. They found a wasteful, rudderless institution. The university had more than 80 telephone systems. People procured their own office computers, each set up with a different configuration. Offices for university support, like human resources and communications, were strewn across the campus, disconnected from one another. There was no capital plan or long-range development plan; in fact, there had not been one since the early 1960s.

"The capital planning was done based on what the people saw in Albany that year," Mr. Simpson says, referring to the state capital.

He was highly impressed with the quality of the faculty members, but they talked about work in terms of their own departments. "Nobody put the university into its conversations—it was all local," he says. "The sum of the whole was less than the sum of the parts."

Buffalo needed a grand plan, and Mr. Simpson asked people to imagine what the university would look like in 2020. Faculty members started working soon after his arrival on a framework of "strengths" that would knit together the university's disciplines in the future. Growth would have to come within those strengths.

Meanwhile, Gov. Eliot Spitzer established a commission to study higher education in New York, led by Hunter R. Rawlings III, a former president of Cornell University. The panel's report, released last year, criticized the state's treatment of public higher education. Few other states, it noted, have such a vast system—SUNY serves more than 400,000 students, on 64 campuses—and the size makes it difficult to govern. Moreover, well-regarded university systems, like those in California, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas, send special resources and attention to their flagships. SUNY has not done that. Instead, the commission said, the system's campuses face chronic problems: "too little revenue, too little investment, and too much regulation."

With the help of local politicians, the University at Buffalo is making a run at that regulation in the pending bill, which passed the State Senate this summer but faces a tough battle in the Assembly.

The proposed changes are of four main kinds. One would allow the university to work through state intermediaries and quasi-governmental agencies to gain access to private

capital, which public universities in other states can already tap. SUNY universities are not allowed to do that.

Another part of the bill would give the university more freedom to forge public-private partnerships, allowing private developers to build facilities on the campus. Public universities in other states can form contracts with private entities to build, say, a hotel and conference center or a bookstore on university land, but SUNY universities are barred from making such deals.

Yet another feature attempts to free the university from needing restrictive state approval for even the most nominal purchases. Buffalo, a university with an annual budget of \$1.3-billion, has to get approval from the state attorney general and the state comptroller anytime it wants to spend more than \$10,000. That leads to delays and additional costs, campus officials say; an engineering building now under construction would have come in 13 months sooner and \$3.8-million cheaper if, as the legislation recommends, the required audits had been moved to the back end instead of the front end.

One of the most controversial features of the legislation deals with tuition. Undergraduates who want to go to SUNY pay the same rate at a big research institution, like Buffalo, as at a small college, like the Old Westbury campus. Buffalo officials believe that an education at their university costs more and should be worth more. They want the ability to raise tuition within one-and-a-half times the increase in the Higher Education Price Index, an annual indicator of changes in college costs. The university would set aside an amount equal to 10 to 20 percent of net-tuition revenue for financial aid for needy students.

The legislation would also prevent the state from raiding the university's appropriations to make up for the price increase. People on the campus are miffed about the Legislature's most recent action regarding tuition: It raised the price 14 percent this year, then kept 80 percent of that money to close a state-budget gap.

Turf Battles

The UB2020 legislation has inspired a similar bill that would apply some of the same rules to all of the state-university system's research campuses, at Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, and Stony Brook, along with the upstate and downstate medical centers. The presidents of the Albany, Binghamton, and Stony Brook campuses support the regulatory reforms of the UB2020 legislation, but some wonder why Buffalo's administrators have not done more to pull the other research campuses along. "I don't understand the notion of doing it for one SUNY campus," said Shirley Strum Kenny, shortly before she retired from her post as Stony

Brook's president this year. "The other three centers would also need that legislation equally. It doesn't make sense."

Mr. Simpson and other administrators at Buffalo say that while they support the bill for the other research campuses, they believe that legislators might be more willing to support limited reforms, with Buffalo acting as a pilot.

In an interview during her inaugural tour of the SUNY system this summer, Nancy L. Zimpher, the new chancellor, said that she favors the legislation that includes all of the research campuses, but that she would support the Buffalo-focused measure if it looked like the only opportunity to start a reform of the state system.

Certainly the UB2020 push has rankled some key people. Ms. Glick, the assembly's higher-education chair, characterizes the legislation as "a wish list for removing any connection to the state university, except for the money they choose to charge." She has reservations about public-private partnerships and says eliminating contract reviews by the attorney general and comptroller would come "at a time when we are seeking greater accountability and more transparency" from government.

She also worries about changes in the tuition structure—that Buffalo's charging more would cut out middle-income students, who might be the most sensitive to price increases and might not receive enough financial aid.

Mr. Smith, the faculty-union president, who has known Mr. Simpson since they were both assistant professors at the University of Washington, voices some of the same concerns. He worries about how the public-private partnerships might affect union rolls, and how public land might be squandered in private deals. Who has a better sense of how to run a campus? he asks. "Is it in the hands of campus managers, or is it in the hands of people who can sit at a distance—that is, our legislators—and look at this?" he says, indicating that it's the legislators.

Around the time he made that argument, however, the State Senate was involved in a monthlong battle that saw legislation grind to a halt, as senators locked one another out of the chamber and squabbled over the gavel.

Still, Mr. Smith believes that big decisions about tuition and campus management should be kept in the hands of legislators.

Prominent business leaders and public figures in Buffalo disagree. "We believe UB2020 is the single most important economic-development project for this region," says Andrew

Rudnick, president and chief executive of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, a regional economic-development organization. He blames resistance to the bill on a philosophical and political split between representatives from upstate and those from downstate, who control the Assembly.

Toby Ann Stavisky, a senator from Queens who chairs the Senate's higher-education committee, says she wants to find a way to pass the bill in the Assembly, even though she disagrees with portions, like the tuition policy, for the sake of Western New York. "I don't view it as an education issue, but as an economic-development program," she says.

Responsibility to Grow

Even if UB2020 clears its legislative hurdle, it faces other challenges. Mr. Simpson says the university needs 1,000 more faculty members to raise its profile to the level of great state flagships, like Ohio State University and the University of Michigan. To get 1,000 more faculty members, though, Buffalo needs 10,000 more students—and New York is in a region that will see flat or declining numbers of traditional-age college students.

Where will those additional students come from? "All over the world," Mr. Simpson answers flatly. But the university already has the highest proportion of international-student enrollment among the nation's public research universities.

The UB2020 plan also suggests that the university could draw 2,000 more graduate students, along with more in-state students, more out-of-state students, and more high-school graduates who wouldn't normally aspire to college.

The environmental crisis, of all things, may help. In coming decades, Western New York may actually have the climate and resources that make it a more attractive place to settle.

That's an argument posed by Robert G. Shibley, a professor of architecture and planning who manages the master-planning elements of UB2020 after spending almost 30 years of his SUNY career avoiding administrative posts. Mr. Shibley, who has designed award-winning plans to revitalize Buffalo, thought UB2020 offered compelling opportunities to realize that revitalization. A century ago, Buffalo was one of the richest cities in America, with the most millionaires per capita. It boasted extensive infrastructure in ports, rail, and canals, not to mention world-class architecture, much of it now available for cheap. "This is a city of tremendous bones," Mr. Shibley says.

The region also has lots of arable land and plenty of water, resources in short supply in parts of the country expected to see the most population growth.

"It is our ecological responsibility to grow here," Mr. Shibley says.

For now he is shepherding some major projects on the downtown medical campus and also focusing on ways to dress up the North and South campuses with new buildings and other amenities. He sees a day when the university builds developments that mix classrooms, residences, and commercial space to create vibrant parts of the campus. Much of that vision, he says, hangs on the fate of the legislation.

Mr. Simpson reports that his conversations about UB2020 with New Yorkers outside of Buffalo often get caught up in provincial competition. (One campus administrator at Buffalo likened the situation to crabs in a barrel—they pull one another down as they try to scramble up.)

To illustrate what's at stake, he tells another story about another city—Singapore. He went there a few years ago with a group of university presidents and learned about city-state's plan to build a world-class research university.

"They want to copy us," he says. "Everyone in the country understands it. They are going to do it.

"You contrast that to the U.S., where the squabble is about who is going to pay the budget this year as opposed to any larger thinking about what the place of a research university is in national security, or economics, or the cultural future of a country," he says. "The most valuable commodity we have in this country—perhaps the one thing that we have left—is higher education. We are doing so much to lose our advantage."