

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES & 3 OTHERS

Union's ambitious plan aims to boost SUNY's standing

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ALBANY — The union that represents SUNY employees is putting forward an ambitious set of proposals which it says will reinvigorate the state's public university system and bolster its role as an economic engine for New York in the new decade.

Dubbed NY25, [the plan outlined by United University Professions](#) aims to transform higher education in New York over the course of five years — but first the union must persuade policymakers to adopt and fund it. And that could prove a Herculean lift, given the scale of some of the ideas and the constraints imposed by the state's [fiscal outlook](#).

Still, UUP President Fred Kowal said he believes it's a worthwhile time to move out of the shadow of the Great Recession and think big.

"We can't just request funding because we need it, or the university needs it," he said in an interview with POLITICO. "There has to be a linkage to what's needed for the university to grow with problems in the community and that people across the state will care about."

UUP's proposals include a mix of big-ticket asks — such as the creation of a \$25 billion SUNY-wide endowment fund and doubling the size of the system's Educational Opportunity Program by 2025 — with more modest proposals, like allowing any New Yorker over the age of 16 to take one free SUNY class every two years if there is space available.

The latter item, akin to expanding the existing practice of course auditing, would flip [declining student enrollment](#) into something of a positive and, Kowal says, would be a way for SUNY to be more present in the average person's day-to-day life.

"We're in a situation where for the vast number of New Yorkers, SUNY is a bit of an unknown," he said.

UUP is also calling for additional commitments to increase faculty diversity and the number of green energy and sustainability initiatives, [both of which are major focuses](#) of SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson, [an engineer](#) who previously served in the U.S. Department of Energy.

"It's a way to lead [on climate issues] while also alleviate some of the financial strains that are on schools," Kowal said.

Kowal said SUNY could further elevate the College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse and make it something of a hub for New York's climate agenda, and promote the SUNY brand nationally.

UUP also envisions SUNY playing a big role in addressing looming issues in the medical workforce, namely by cutting tuition at its four medical schools to \$25,000. (Prospective

physicians are paying \$43,000 in tuition this academic year.)

“We’re going to have a retirement wave and it’s going to be necessary to provide an answer for the coming doctor shortage,” he said, [pointing to data](#) from the Association of American Medical Colleges that more than a third of New York’s physicians are 60 or older.

Whether any of UUP’s ideas gain traction remains to be seen. The state will have to close a projected \$6 billion shortfall, due largely to trouble in the Medicaid program, and top lawmakers already are eyeing substantial changes to [K-12 education aid](#) and [capital funding](#) for New York’s public colleges and universities, to say nothing of priority issues outside of education.

The SUNY Board of Trustees is schedule to meet Thursday to discuss its own budget requests for the next fiscal year before lawmakers return to Albany in January.

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