

Open SUNY: Let's Do It Right!

What is Open SUNY?

SUNY System Administration describes Open SUNY as the largest online, distance and open learning initiative in the U.S. SUNY's goal is to be the largest public online educator, growing online enrollment to exceed 100,000 by 2017. SUNY proposes to expand online degree programs and resources, prior learning assessments (course credit for life and work experience), competency-based programs and other alternatives to classroom instruction, including experimentation with for-credit Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Some Open SUNY components:

- 100 percent transferable General Education courses (through the Seamless Transfer initiative)
- Graduation in three years for 25 percent of SUNY students by 2015
- Electronic advisement through creation of a digital concierge to assist in providing advisement services such as planning, navigating and completing course and degree selection
- New online bachelor's degree programs
- Sharing of established courses across SUNY institutions through cross-registration, including General Education and elective courses that are part of majors
- Grants to develop open e-textbooks
- A systemwide electronic database to facilitate degree and transfer options within SUNY

What is SUNY's timeline for Open SUNY?

January 2014: Unveiling of Open SUNY

September 2014: Prepare to launch Open SUNY "at scale."

Can SUNY meet its ambitious goals?

At this point, SUNY has not provided a clear plan for implementation and oversight, course and curriculum development, or funding for Open SUNY. While SUNY

is engaged in an extensive marketing campaign aimed at securing support for Open SUNY, critical details have yet to be announced.

How does the Open SUNY initiative differ from the development and expansion of online courses at SUNY campuses in recent years?

Open SUNY is an administrative initiative, unlike faculty-led online course expansion that allows for high-quality online education and student success. It has been rolled out with limited input from SUNY academics and professionals with teaching and service delivery experience.

The following Open SUNY goals are inconsistent with an educationally sound expansion of online education:

- Rapid expansion of online courses
- Increasing standardization of course content and interchangeable courses
- Delivery of courses and services by private, profit-seeking corporations such as Coursera and McKinsey Consulting



UUP's Concerns and Perspectives

◆ Open SUNY, as currently planned, may compromise educational quality and access

Open SUNY, coupled with the Seamless Transfer initiative, suggests that SUNY may be targeting students taking introductory and general education courses and/or low-income students seeking a "less-expensive" degree. Unfortunately, there is broad agreement that students of color, low-income students, academically underprepared students, and

first-generation college students benefit most from an educational environment that stresses social interaction with faculty and peers. According to "The 'Promises' of Online Higher Education: Access," an October study by the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, these students run the most risk of **losing access** through online learning.

◆ UUP supports high-quality online education, which Open SUNY may compromise

UUP strongly supports online courses being designed and taught by faculty at SUNY institutions. Many SUNY professors already provide quality online education to their students, developing each course with the best teaching and learning practices in mind. The SUNY Learning Network, which launched in 1994, offers thousands of online courses, along with more than 80 online degree programs. Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning offers more than 500 online courses and includes support for students to work with faculty mentors, along with

one-on-one communication with faculty and course instructors. However, Open SUNY may encourage the development of interchangeable courses and shift control and responsibility from campuses to for-profit consultants. These standardized online courses could diminish the diversity of campus missions and curricula, and restrict exposure to faculty with varying knowledge and perspectives. It could also limit the face-to-face advisement and mentoring that many students need to successfully complete college-level work.

Recommended Actions

Hold SUNY accountable for providing answers to the following questions:

◆ How much funding will be made available to implement Open SUNY? Will there be additional funding or will existing funds be reallocated within institutions?

If SUNY does not obtain additional, adequate funding, it is possible that inadequately funded

programs and services will see further resource reductions.

◆ Will Open SUNY lead to a redistribution of funding within the system?

Cross-registration increases the possibility that better-funded campuses will be able to increase online course offerings, drawing enrollments from resource-starved campuses. At a Nov. 18 meeting with UUP officers, SUNY officials indicated that for

courses that draw students from multiple campuses, the full-time equivalent (FTE) would go to the campus hosting the course. FTEs affect campus budget allocations.

◆ How will Open SUNY impact diverse student populations with different needs and access limitations?

SUNY's plan for robo-calls and email in place of in-person advisement could fail to adequately serve students with differing needs and levels of college preparedness. Open SUNY's "conciierge"

system could drain resources from financially pressed advisement and academic support programs with proven track records of success.

◆ **How much money will SUNY allocate to private corporations and outside vendors as providers of a wide variety of online learning services, including course development, marketing, IT support, and textbooks?**

Open SUNY presently is dependent on two consultants: McKinsey Consulting for assistance with the implementation and communication of Open SUNY, and Coursera to develop a platform to deliver MOOCs across the SUNY system.

SUNY has plans to expand private contracting to deliver additional educational services. Why is SUNY introducing profit-generation into the delivery of public education to the citizens of New York state?

◆ **Will faculty members' intellectual property rights be protected if they choose to use Coursera or any other contractor's platform to deliver online education?**

Faculty who design online courses need absolute assurance that they will maintain control and ownership of the content of the courses they create.

Protections must be put in place to prevent the contracting out of faculty-created courses without their full understanding and consent.

Urge the chancellor to revise Open SUNY plans

Open SUNY, in its current form, is based on very limited faculty input and lacks the planning, infrastructure and funding necessary to ensure current and future students a quality higher education. If not done carefully, Open SUNY has the potential to impede access, erode educational quality, and weaken academic standards.

◆ **UUP urges the chancellor to slow down the Open SUNY initiative and require an assessment of current plans with the following in mind:**

1. Any new initiative that will impact the educational services SUNY provides must include a substantive plan for implementation and oversight.

Open SUNY has been given an "unveiling" date of January 2014 and a launch date of September 2014, but "details are still in development." SUNY has not revealed specifics on how much funding will be made available to implement these broad and

complex ideas, or how the funding will be allocated. The plan should also assess the impact of Open SUNY on diverse curricula and student populations, as well as on the overall public mission of SUNY.

2. Course and curriculum development and support must rely on academic and professional faculty expertise and relate to the needs of students.

Academic and professional faculty, administrators and students should be involved in the planning and implementation of Open SUNY across the system. Open SUNY's push toward a standardized educational process that stresses speed and transferability could jeopardize the quality of educational programs. A curriculum developed by faculty experts, as a matter of practice,

moves students sequentially through preparatory classes and on to more advanced classes in a process based on student interests and faculty guidance. In contrast, what SUNY has made public so far indicates that, through Open SUNY, courses may be offered in a disconnected way, out of context and without a carefully developed, campus-specific curriculum.

3. Resource needs must be accurately identified, including full-time teaching faculty, professional support personnel, and new technology.

Research has shown that larger student-to-faculty ratios adversely impact student performance. In addition, face-to-face advisement and mentoring have proven to be indispensable for student persistence and success. As currently staffed, SUNY's teaching and professional faculty cannot

support Open SUNY's planned increase in students. There is a need for additional technology, advisement and other support services. Advisement in the form of robo-calls and emails makes it more likely that at-risk students will not succeed.

4. Investment in infrastructure necessary to support expansion of online degree programs is critical.

The development of courses to fit multiple delivery methods requires training, skill, and academic and technical innovations. Additional

time and resources, and investment in the technical support infrastructure, are necessary to deliver these services.

5. New York state tax dollars should be invested in public higher education, not in private consultants and for-profit corporations.

Several SUNY campuses have developed and successfully delivered quality online education. Open SUNY will potentially shift the control and responsibility from the campuses to for-profit corporations such as Coursera and McKinsey

Consulting. SUNY campuses are already successfully delivering online courses in keeping with their mission to educate the next generation; the mission of Coursera, and other private online higher education providers, is to turn a profit.

Protect the mission of New York state's public higher education system!

- ◆ **Faculty and staff must be involved** in all aspects of developing, implementing, delivering and assessing expanded online courses and access through Open SUNY.
- ◆ A comprehensive review of current online courses, prior-learning assessment and competency-based programs must be done to determine the most effective **current practices** and the feasibility of expanding those successful **student-focused approaches**—before turning to for-profit consultants.
- ◆ **Campuses should not contract** with any outside vendor to deliver online courses or programs without the prior approval of the relevant department, program or curriculum committee.
- ◆ The first line of SUNY's mission states "... **provide to the people of New York educational services of the highest quality.**" UUP calls on the chancellor to redirect SUNY to its essential educational mission and work collaboratively with our academic and professional faculty to ensure all new educational initiatives are academically sound and enhance the mission of SUNY: to provide quality, affordable and accessible public higher education to all New Yorkers.



UUP Contact Information

Members can contact their UUP chapter office for additional information and follow-up or they can contact UUP's statewide vice presidents at 1-800-342-4206 or via email:

Vice President for Academics Jamie Dangler, jdangler@uupmail.org

Vice President for Professionals Philippe Abraham, pabraham@uupmail.org