As is now becoming a pattern, I am reporting on the important issues that have taken the majority of my time since we last met. These are also the issues that I believe have been of greatest importance to the system, hence to this body and to each of us.

1. SUNY’s Strategic Plan. “The Power of SUNY.” Phase II of the planning process concluded on March 18 in Albany at Nanotech Science, with a rescheduled conversation on health in New York and a concluding session introducing some of the final themes. On April 12, Phase III began with the roll-out of the “The Power of SUNY” a document and a presentation Faculty Senators will see on Saturday morning of the plenary, when the Chancellor introduces the plan. Later this summer, a fuller version, complete with evaluation metrics, will be released.

The plan offers a new direction for SUNY, a major redefinition of the relationship between the citizens of the state and their public university, with SUNY promising to become a much more active participant in the larger community by bringing our knowledge, expertise, institutional reach and research capability to bear on pressing social problems, such as the state of health in New York, the need for clean, renewable energy, and our disastrously leaky educational pipeline. The plan redefines the Land Grant tradition for the 21st century and recalls the patterns of social discrimination that provided the seedbed for our university. “The Power of SUNY” seeks to focus our knowledge, and research capability to address the seemingly intractable contemporary problems.

In a sense, it commits SUNY to leave the ivory tower for the streets where our constituents live, engaging all our constituencies to participating in and improving New York’s community life. This commitment to addressing significant social problems of the larger society has a distinguished history, as in the “Wisconsin Idea” at the turn of the last century, which used the expertise in that state university to address the social inequities that had resulted from the rapid industrialization of the late 19th century.

No other public agency can fulfill this public mission, and while the issues of our time are quite different from those of a century ago, the shape of the relationship, the mutual obligations of support and service, are not. It has been a pleasure to have served among the “Traveling 200” and to represent you on the Strategic Planning Steering Committee.

2. Budget. It is obvious that the SUNY budget cuts last fall posed significant challenges to the system, especially the state-operated campuses. The Governor’s budget offered cuts of approximately $118 million, but there were additional elements, such as a $34 million unspecified union give back, that ran the real figure much higher. With the release of the budget projections by each house of the legislature, it appears that there will be no restoration of these cuts, or if there is some restoration, it will be quite small. Senior Vice Chancellor Rimai will give us a much more detailed update on the budget during the plenary, but a realistic
appraisal of current realities, based on our direct discussion with the chairs of the higher education committees of the Assembly and the Senate, confirms the belief that there is no expectation of legislative restoration. The hole that the State has dug for itself is simply too deep and the dollars needed to fill the gap too great, $9 billion and still counting. And the prospect for next year is no better, as the federal stimulus funds will have dried up. This makes it all the more important that SUNY work to craft a new funding pattern with the state, to determine a base funding level that is essential for us to accomplish our mission, to safeguard the annual legislative appropriations from gubernatorial reductions, and to make certain that the tuition paid by students goes to support their education, not state prisons.

3. PHEEIA. The Empowerment Act has been largely rejected by both houses, certainly more clearly by the Assembly which has refused to act on it until the budget is completed. The Senate, on the other hand, has approved several of the initiatives while it made some surprising cuts of its own. In truth, unless there was a willingness to enact almost all of the features of the Act, there was little that it offered in immediate budgetary relief that the state could not have provided by a substantial tuition increase. The SUNY administration, through a March 25th letter from the Chancellor to state leaders, articulated its minimum needs for this budget year, among which were:

- Restoration of community college aid
- Moving all SUNY funds into aid to localities (which would prevent gubernatorial sweeps without legislative action)
- Differential tuition of the university centers
- Public-private partnerships for the university centers
- Elimination of pre-audit for purchases

As we had at SUNY Cobleskill in the previous plenary, Senior Vice Chancellor Rimai will update us regarding this gubernatorial, now SUNY, initiative.

4. Student Mobility, Revision of General Education and SUNY Assessment. In the past six months, the Board of Trustees has passed resolutions that have revised existing policies for each of these areas that return significant latitude to the campuses to implement the SUNY mandates, at least for General Education and Assessment. For example, the general education revision allows for students to complete a minimum program of 30 credits in any five to eight of the SUNY enumerated 10 general education categories, in addition to required work in basic composition and mathematics. And while assessment results in both the major and general education programs offered by each campus will no longer be routinely reviewed by the Provost’s office, the assessment programs will remain and be improved given the demands by external accrediting agencies.

Student mobility is a bit different, in that the entire thrust of the policy has been to replace often idiosyncratic transfer processes on each campus with a more systemic and system-wide approach, including the faculty staffed review boards implemented
last year. The Interim Provost has worked to identify a core of five to six courses
normally offered in the first two years of each academic major, and then to employ
faculty committees to identify the core subjects for those courses. These courses
will be, like their gen ed counterparts, “guaranteed” to transfer, both the credits
earned and satisfying requirements of the academic major.

The introductory accounting course group is nearing completion of its work, and
several others, including Communication, Criminal Justice and Social Work are just
beginning. While this process is not perfect, none would be. It seems, however, to be
a workable compromise between the need for system-wide transfer and faculty
control of curriculum.

5. Honors and Awards. At times like these, it is too easy to be overwhelmed by the
impediments that appear between us and our work, and hence often difficult to
remember what we do well. Fortunately, I have the privilege, especially in the
spring, to have many reminders of the superb quality of our individual and collective
efforts. Last week, for example, the Undergraduate Committee hosted a poster
exhibition in the Legislative Office Building of 98 undergraduate research projects
that clearly documented the extraordinary work that is being done on every campus,
at every level. The week before that there was the Chancellor’s Award for Student
Excellence ceremony with more than two hundred students receiving that singular
honor. And, in two weeks, we will have two dinners to honor the promotions of
many of our colleagues to the highest professorial rank available in the University,
Distinguished Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor and Distinguished Service
Professor. These honors, awards, promotions are testimony to our shared
commitment to our disciplines, to our students, to SUNY.

Summary: Last winter I wrote, “With the appointment of Nancy Zimpher as Chancellor,
SUNY began a new era, one in which a Chancellor who offered experience and nationally
recognized academic leadership was given the support of the Board of Trustees to guide
the nation’s largest comprehensive system of higher education.” Nothing in the past four
months would lead me to question either the sentiment or the wording. Chancellor
Zimpher has brought significant new energy, necessary expertise acquired through her
prior presidential experience to this job, one that she has called “the best job in
American higher education.” Despite the current – and future – budget problems, SUNY
now has the leadership in Albany to match the quality we provide on the ground, on
every campus, across the breadth of the state. It is an exciting time.

Respectfully submitted
Kenneth P. O’Brien
President
April 19, 2010