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Industry ROUNDTABLE

HIGHER EDUCATION

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Higher education is in a time of transition. The classroom experience and skill sets demanded by employers are ever-changing. And while applications are rising, so are concerns over cost and debt. Law firm Hodgson Russ and the *Albany Business Review* recently convened a panel of six leaders in education at the firm's office to discuss these issues and others. Mike Hendricks, editor of the *Albany Business Review*, moderated the discussion.

▶ MEET THE PANEL



DR. CERRI BANKS

Title: Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs
Company: Skidmore College



ANTHONY K. HAYNES

Title: Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives and Information Systems
Company: Albany Law School



MICHAEL J. HICKEY

Title: Vice President and Chief of Staff
Company: Siena College



DR. JOHN KOWAL

Title: Vice President for Academic Affairs
Company: Maria College



DR. DEBORAH SOPCZYK

Title: Provost and Chief Academic Officer
Company: Excelsior College



DARRELL WHEELER

Title: Interim Provost
Company: University at Albany



There is plenty of talk about the high and unsustainable costs of tuition. What steps are schools taking to temper those costs?

DR. DEBORAH SOPCZYK: We work with working adults. Taking out a \$100,000 or \$200,000 college loan when you're 20 years old is vastly different from taking out that same loan when you're 40.

We have students who are putting their own children through school. So it is an obstacle that we try to address. And I think we have tried to approach it in a number of different ways. We have tried very hard to streamline our processes, to reduce our cost so that we can save costs for students. One of the things we've done very successfully, in terms of lowering the cost of tuition for students, is allowing students to transfer in credits. We created curricula that are designed for maximum flexibility.

MICHAEL J. HICKEY: We have more schools than we ever have. But in the Northeast, there's a demographic situation in that less than half the kids are deciding to go to college nowadays. So, it's creating a market dynamic where we have a lot more supply than we do demand, which is going to force prices down. When we talk about tuition, it's really important to understand that it's not the list price of tuition, it's net tuition. You hear the terms discount rates and growing discount rates. So, when people are actually paying for their education, their net tuition is actually going down.

As an example, at Siena we're down 6.7 percent in net tuition since 2011. We all get labeled as increasing our prices when, in fact, we are decreasing our prices and the market is forcing us to decrease our prices. Overall, since 2008, I think we're up about

1.2 percent total. So we're reacting because economic laws and the market dynamics force you to adapt to that. Colleges are looking at ways to save money and reduce tuition in the form of discount rates. I think students and parents are getting better deals now in the marketplace.

DARRELL WHEELER: Depending on which statistic you're looking at, anywhere from 50 percent to 70 percent of University at Albany students are Pell eligible, receiving some sort of tuition assistance. Our students are at least 40 percent non-white, primarily comprised of African-American and Latino students. Many of those individuals are first-generation students, meaning they're the first in their family to attend college or university. And many are, again, because they're Pell eligible, are at the margins of economic capacity.

That stated, University at Albany remains one of the least expensive universities with regards to recent data on the average cost of tuition. The most important thing is the positive return on investment. Many of our students are on the economic fringes, and an average annual tuition before room and board of \$6,000 to \$7,000 is still a hefty price tag. We work very closely with our students to assure that they're accessing internships and the TAP and Pell resources that enable them to meet the financial burden and leverage the full benefit of dollars available.

DR. JOHN KOWAL: The Sisters of Mercy who created the college started with a strong sense of stewardship, of student financial resources, with a commitment to respecting the fact that many of those students have very, very significant challenges. And that sense of stewardship continues to be a guiding principle. We have a high percentage of Pell-eligible students, and those who qualify for financial aid can make it through their associate or bachelor's degree with their tuition covered by financial aid. However, we have a high number of students who transfer to Maria, and they've run out of their financial aid before they finish their degree. We've created more transfer-friendly programs. Our top two programs, nursing and occupational therapy assistant, have jobs available in the area. It's very important that there's that return on investment.



Skidmore is at the upper end of tuition in our region. What's the situation that you're seeing?



(Back, left) Dr. Deborah Sopczyk, Dr. John Kowal, Antony Haynes and Dr. Cerri Banks. (Seated, left) Darrell Wheeler and Michael Hickey.

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DR. CERRI BANKS: Private liberal arts colleges often get a bad rap around cost, but we are committed to supporting families by meeting their demonstrated needs. And tuition goes up, but financial aid does also. So we're proud that at Skidmore, the net cost to families has remained pretty much flat for quite a while. We are also quite diligent in looking at our comprehensive fee, in looking at peer schools, and being deliberate in our budget choices about how much financial aid we offer and what the percentage, if we have to increase the fee, looks like so that we're not pricing our way out of families being able to come to Skidmore.



What challenges are specific to today's laws schools, and how is Albany Law addressing them?

ANTHONY K. HAYNES: Nationally speaking, applications across the board to the 205 American Bar Association-accredited law schools have declined at least 50 percent from 10 years ago. With much less demand for legal education, one of our challenges is attracting more students and more diversity. One of our key focuses is making sure students are actually employed post graduation, because in the declining market for students with a legal education, that's a reflection of the declining business market for lawyers.

So, the first thing we do is have a very strong career center. As an example, in our last group, we had a 90 percent employment rate in JD jobs, which is extraordinary in the declining legal market. We do a great job of connecting alumni and other employers who are interested in our graduates. Approximately 75 percent of our students receive some form of tuition or financial aid. Last year, we had over \$7 million given out in scholarships and financial aid to our students. We also created an accelerated JD program. Normally, it's three years to complete a graduate degree in law, but students can do it in two years and save approximately one-third of the tuition cost.



How would Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposal for free tuition impact New York's public and private schools?

WHEELER: State institutions have increased in their demographic diversity, but state dollars have decreased to these same institutions. Why is it that, as we see a shift in the demographics, we see a decline in the dollars that are devoted to a population that is the most at need? The implications could be far-reaching initially for our public schools, but more importantly, for New York state's economic situation.

HICKEY: We do need educated people, particularly in some of the STEM areas. This proposal is supposedly only going to cost \$165 million. I think there are questions about that, and the fact that the cost gets passed to every taxpayer. There's also the idea of choice. If we try to force people into things that might not be the right fit, I'm not sure it's the right way to educate more people. We estimate it could cost Siena over 300 students, and it's hard to think that the 1,000 people we employ won't be affected.

KOWAL: The proposal will further disadvantage the economically disadvantaged. Tax-derived resources are going to be directed into paying tuition rather than perhaps supporting retention, supporting student support services at various institutions and providing financial aid for the most economically disadvantaged. It puts a further squeeze on those who may not have the option to attend college because of economic barriers.

SOPCZYK: I'm not sure free tuition in public institutions the right way to address the cost of higher education. Excelsior College has been fortunate enough to have a number of grants where we have received money to develop programs. And as part of that, we've offered free tuition to students during the pilot phase of these programs. The retention in these pro-

grams is terrible. We've had attrition rates as high as 50 percent and 60 percent in programs that have free tuition. It's very easy to drop out because they don't have any skin in the game.

BANKS: I think the disparity at our institutions is on economic diversity, so we work hard to make sure that there are students and families that can pay the full tuition out of pocket, and there are those who can't pay any of it. And we want that cross-section of folks to be coming to our institutions. I think if we drive people in particular ways, there's an imbalance that I think is harmful to all of us across the board.



Is the complexity of the issue being given proper recognition in the public debate?

HAYNES: The deeper issues are the changing nature of work and the changing nature of education. We don't know whether or not this single proposal can address those concerns. Maybe the questions should be: What about retraining at a job? How do you acquire lifelong learning skills? When software can take first-year lawyers and first-year associates at law firms and do their work for them, then where does the human being come in? I need client empathy, I need client skills, and I need judgment and creativity. At some point, you've got to think about, where will these jobs come from and what sort of training and education is required?

WHEELER: When we're sending people to college who have ideas about college who are not prepared for college, then you've already anticipated the rate of failure. The money not spent on the front end is actually highly correlated, in my estimation, to some critical decisions made on more complex issues about who's worthy and who's not worthy, and who lives in environments where income derived from the parents actually fuels the educational

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system that you come out of. If we don't address those components, we'll continue to end up with a multi-tiered educational system, no matter what programs we put into place, because the point of access is going to be determined early on by your K-12 experience.

BANKS: What we hear from employers is that they need individuals that understand that there are opinions different from their own, can engage in respectful debate around that, and understand the globalization of work. Some of the most life-changing experiences students have are study abroad. We have internship programs where the student can leave for a semester and live somewhere else and work. I worry about those experiences being lost. Many of our students, particularly economically disadvantaged students or students of color, have not traveled to other places in the world and spent significant amounts of time in other places. We want to make sure they still have those opportunities.

SOPCZYK: We have a growing number of people who are just overwhelmed with student debt. I think they hear something like 'free tuition' and it's difficult to hear past that. I participated in a round table discussion two weeks ago, and we had an audience there of young people. All they could talk about was their college loans. They really couldn't get past that. It's overwhelming. It's hard for people to start their lives when they're faced with all of this debt. So it's difficult for them to see the issues.

Years ago, there was no talk about return on investment. Today, academics talk about the pressure to cut out humanities because schools are competing for students that want the shortest path to a

degree at the cheapest cost. How does liberal arts education fit into all of this?

BANKS: Cutting them has not been part of our conversation. We're looking at ways for students to make more connections to have particular types of bridge experiences that help reinforce why this learning is important.

HICKEY: There is sort of this fear of the commercialization of higher ed, with people referring to students as customers, talk about ROI, and things like that. I think the academy is in pain in reaction to that. Affordability of college is an issue and we all are addressing it in different, and probably similar, ways. But we're all addressing it. I think there are some things to learn from other industries that have faced supply-demand issues that you can borrow from and look at. At the same time, we're about education. We have to make sure that the integrity of the academic part is absolutely there and holds true.

WHEELER: In contemporary times, one of the things that strikes me is that the term liberal arts education has been conflated with dichotomy between liberalism and conservatism. Following the November election, I was engaged with some family members who expressed concerns about their children going to a public liberal university and what that meant to them. It was clear they were dichotomizing between a public institution that fostered critical inquiry, and conservative values. It becomes very easy to put on the chopping block those things that people surmise take away from their right to be conservative or non-liberal or on a continuum in the spectrum. In fact, the university's role is to advance the process

of critical inquiry. If we find ourselves promoting an educational ideology that says everyone is going to come out with one modus operandi, then we are going to be in real trouble as a society.

HICKEY: One can argue that, globally, liberal arts is what made us successful in the marketplace. It's funny. With this criticism of a liberal arts education, you have a country like China, which has really struggled with the specific domain of education experience and lack of liberal arts, looking at the American system and copying it. They recognize the important foundation of liberal arts as it relates to creating good leaders, good citizens, good team players, good critical thinkers, and so forth. IBM also has a model called the Team-Up Model, which is based on that same thing—a foundation of liberal arts and a couple other disciplines. That's what they're encouraging from the standpoint of what works in their competitive marketplace. So, we really have this dichotomy of criticism that I think is actually misaligned with what has gotten us to be successful and what will keep us successful in the future.

SOPCZYK: I think this concept of career readiness fits well with liberal arts as well as with other things. There is a whole set of soft skills that have been identified already: the ability to think critically, the ability to be a member and participate as a member of a team, leadership skills, presentation skills. Those are all very, very important skills for the workplace, and skills that are part of a liberal arts education. They should be threads that go throughout a curriculum.

KOWAL: I would agree. At Maria, we've just instituted a collegewide requirement that all students take

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a course in the foundations of social justice. We feel it's important in terms of our history as an institution, and also in understanding globally and locally some of the challenges people face in their daily lives. We've also expanded our requirements for writing courses from three credits to six credits for every single degree, because we felt that there was a shortfall in the writing abilities of our graduates. These courses may seem irrelevant to a particular student at a particular time, but it's the experiences of doing the analysis, the discussion, the dialogue, that plays a very important role in preparing people for being good citizens and successful in their chosen careers.

BANKS: We need to be preparing people for the workplace, whatever our foundations and values, and figure out how to do that. Skidmore is very deliberate in doing that, and understanding what students face when they go into the world of work. Critiques often push us to get out of our world, right? We have a particular elite space in the world. Get out of that. How are we engaged in our communities? For instance, how are we engaged in this conversation about tuition? How are we helping the broader public know exactly what it is we do, all the similarities around what we do, our sort of shared values? That it's, as you described, both, as opposed to this dichotomous conversation that you could do one thing or the other. I think higher education is also one of the slower places to respond to major changes in what's happening in the world. So, as much as the critiques at times keep me up at night because of the fallout and the consequences, I do think we need to pay attention to the ways that we haven't necessarily addressed higher education as a public good, make people aware of that, and use those critiques as opportunities.

HAYNES: There are a number of thorny but important issues. Some of them revolve around what we call intercultural competence and diversity. At Albany Law School, we've made an institutional objective or outcome to make sure that all of our graduates are interculturally competent – that they understand other cultures and are able to operate in them. As an attorney, if you are unable to meet with clients and people from a variety of backgrounds, you're going to have a difficult time being successful. From our point of view, it's a job competency requirement. It's not an option. Writing is very important to us. We have writing across the curriculum. You have to have a major writing project, a Law Review article, in order to graduate. We believe that things like writing and understanding history, critical analysis and social justice issues, are critical to your competency as a lawyer because lawyers have to speak and communicate about a variety of issues. If you can't write eloquently and speak eloquently, then you're not going to be persuasive to a judge or court. So, we are interweaving conceptions of cultural competency with advocacy and justice as part of our core curriculum.

BANKS: We are engaging in curriculum conversations now. One of the experiences we are talking about is called a bridge experience, where students have to demonstrate that they have an understanding of domestic university. Sometimes, the global culture is an easier discussion for folks to enter into. Those terrible things that are happening over there as opposed to what is happening domestically. We worked hard as a curriculum committee to keep the focus on the domestic and keep the language about the domestic, because that's a different set of skills. Our institutions don't exist in a vacuum. What's happening in the world, we see it and have to man-



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age it every day. But I still believe that higher education is the place where we have these conversations better than any other industry. I think it's the place where young people come in. And it's not moving away from the idea that you have to believe what I believe, but how do we understand and validate the humanity of all people. And I think we do that well and we can't lose sight of how we do that.



Michael Hickey, you come from the business world. Now you're in the academic world. What's your frustration?

HICKEY: Certainly, pace would be one of the things. But the second thing that really kind of surprised me, because I always thought that higher education is very collegial, is the divisiveness. There's a lack of a common vision and people working together as a team to achieve that. There are a lot of personal agendas. That was kind of a shock for me.



Are you optimistic, Dr. Sopczyk?

SOPCZYK: Absolutely, I'm optimistic. If you listen to the conversation here, it's clear that people in education are committed to providing meaningful education for their students, whether their students are 18-year olds or whether their students are adults. One of our frustrations is always resources. Students have difficulty finding the money to pay for tuition. I think institutions also struggle with this issue of resources. There are so many things that we want to do for our students that we recognize the need in so many areas, and I think we all struggle a little bit trying to find the resources to do what we know needs to be done.



Dr. Kowal, what are your biggest frustrations that you don't get to talk about?

KOWAL: I have a couple of frustrations. One is the slow nature of change in higher education, kind of the glacial pace that change sometimes occurs at in institutions of higher ed. But in other cases, some-

times things happen more quickly. I think we need to be careful in responding to the different stimuli in the broader environment, but also stay true to our mission as an institution.

I'm on a committee called the "Environmental Consortium of Colleges and Universities." Most of the colleges in the consortium are in the lower Hudson, some private, some public. The frustration is trying to get institutions to collaborate through sharing of research initiatives, getting over those barriers that keep us in our institution silos. But I'm optimistic. I'm hoping that there can be more collaboration among institutions. One of my highest priorities at Maria is to work with colleagues at other institutions to build pathways for our students, relying on our individual strengths and not trying to duplicate what different institutions are doing.



Would you like to wrap things up, Dean Haynes?

HAYNES: I think that making better teamwork, less territoriality, is a challenge. Faster pace of change is a challenge, and also resources. I think those are definitely challenges we face. But I would say in the future, I'm optimistic as well. I think online learning is a big trend. We didn't get to that topical area. But I've been working on a program to provide legal education to non-lawyers online, as well as our studies in cybersecurity and data privacy. The idea here is that we can reach a global, or at least a national audience, and get more students involved and interested in the region by having online learning. In addition, there's the idea of affiliations and partnerships. I think Albany Law has an affiliation with half of the people at this table. That's a way of leveraging skills and resources at other institutions to handle the resource challenge, have a synergy and make a bigger whole from the parts. I think we're definitely at the beginning of a growth period for education. And I think there are great opportunities to do really great things, innovative things that will provide a broader access and a higher quality education to a large number of people.