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## SUNY Fight Over Curriculum Mirrors Larger Debate

By **KAREN W. ARENSON**

In the growing nationwide battle over who really runs higher education -- the professors or the university trustees -- one of the most closely watched contests is taking place here, at the State University of New York. To the consternation of many faculty members, SUNY's trustees have moved to hold down the university's budget, to make the campuses more self-supporting and, most provocatively, to establish a common required curriculum on all campuses.

If this were a schoolyard brawl, the trustees would seem to be winning, but the SUNY faculty union called in reinforcements this week. In a show of strength, the American Association of University Professors joined the union on the plaza in front of SUNY's Gothic administration building, pledging to fight what they both see as the growing incursion onto the faculty's turf by the SUNY trustees, all appointed by Gov. George E. Pataki.

"We are determined to find ways to counter such dire encroachments on the integrity of a great institution like SUNY," said Mary Burgan, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, which is based in Washington.

In many ways, the battle is the latest incarnation of the culture wars that flourished in the 1980's. It pits those who hold that students should be steeped in a precisely specified traditional curriculum (including Western civilization and literary classics) against those who say that students can learn the same thinking and writing skills by focusing on a more idiosyncratic range of subjects that embraces a diverse selection of viewpoints, including more female and minority authors.

The latest encounter, however, is being played out at public universities like SUNY that are now being governed mostly by conservative trustees appointed by conservative politicians, like Governor Pataki, who are being pitted against the more liberal-leaning faculties at these universities.

Part of the university professors association's alarm -- shared by faculty members on many campuses -- stems from the belief that the decisions about what to teach go to the heart of the role of faculty in higher education, and that more and more they are losing control of those decisions.

"If the faculty cannot control the curriculum -- their core area of expertise -- then every other part of the university is up for grabs," said Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott, an Eastern Michigan University professor who has studied university governance.

The issue is not just curriculum, but the coherence and unity of the institution, said Arthur Levine, president of Columbia Teachers College. "When a board of trustees takes upon itself the job of planning curriculum, this represents a vote of no confidence in the academic leadership of a university."

Although Mr. Levine supports the concept of a required core curriculum, he said it is an "inappropriate role for a lay board without curriculum expertise to assume," as well as a violation of academic freedom. "In doing so, they are usurping the expert functions of the faculty, president and academic vice president."

What students should learn has always stirred hot debate, and curricular requirements are about as constant as skirt hems. Beginning in the late 1960's, many universities moved away from well-defined course requirements to a cafeteria approach that gave students more freedom. More recently, the pendulum seems to be swinging the other way.

Until recently, however, these decisions were usually left to committees of professors and deans, even though trustees clearly held the ultimate authority. No longer. While many faculty members still view curricular issues as sacred, to many trustees it is simply one more problem that needs fixing, and more and more, they are taking the lead.

The SUNY trustees dived into curriculum several years ago, saying that students ought to have rigorous introductory courses in an array of fields. Although the faculty senate had already offered its own vision of general education -- one that called for each campus to develop its own curriculum, following certain guidelines -- the trustees were not satisfied.

In December 1998, the trustees approved a required curriculum that included natural sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, Western civilization and world civilizations. Also on their list were American history, humanities and the arts, information technology and communications.

Although there had been months of general discussion, SUNY faculty and college presidents were stunned by the sudden passage of the requirements, which had not been circulated for review before the trustees voted on them. But conservative interest groups like the Empire Foundation in New York State and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a national

group that works with conservative trustees around the country, applauded the move.

Although the SUNY move seemed somewhat unusual at the time, officials from the American Association of University Professors said this week that they were seeing trustees moving onto turf they considered the faculty's at other public universities too, including George Mason University in Virginia and the City University of New York.

At CUNY, trustees recently adopted a new master plan for the university despite faculty protests that they had not been adequately consulted. During discussions of the plan, some trustees proposed that the university adopt a common required curriculum although the chancellor has called for broad faculty discussion of the matter and said he does not favor a common curriculum.

At SUNY, there are disagreements within the faculty about how to proceed. Even as union leaders have been seeking to hold the trustees in check through greater publicity about their actions, faculty senate leaders have been trying to mend their relationships with the administration.

Gail Hagenah, a faculty senate vice president, told the trustees that senate leaders were finding it easy to communicate with both the new chancellor, Robert L. King, and SUNY's chairman, Thomas F. Egan.

Mr. Egan declined to be interviewed, but said in a statement that senate representatives had helped develop the guidelines for the new curriculum. The requirements will take effect in the fall.

Other faculty members, however, remain skeptical that the chasms can be bridged with the current trustees in place.

Vincent Aceto, the former president of the faculty senate, said that he had tried to work with the trustees for several years, but that it had backfired.

"We made an honest attempt to try to work with the trustees as much as possible," he said. "The only thing they respond to is hardball."

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### **Organizations mentioned in this article:**

State University of New York

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