

Albany college leaders consider creating a consortium to address challenges

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Fewer students are enrolling in colleges and universities. Population demographics are changing. And business owners say they need more trained employees to fill their workforce needs.

Those issues are part of why Havidán Rodríguez, the University at Albany president who is in his second year, wanted to convene the leaders of local colleges and universities to discuss ways to collaborate and work together regionally.



"We are not here to compete with each other but to work collaboratively as a group, to see what are the challenges but what are the opportunities, how can we continue to have an impact in the Capital Region?" Rodríguez told the *Business Review*. "How do we put all this in one place and then start having the conversations with our elected officials, with industry and others to talk about the impact that we have?"

Nineteen college presidents attended a meeting with that goal on Monday at UAlbany. The higher education leaders talked about issues like declining enrollment, and how to balance tuition affordability with making budget.

"On the one hand, we have this amazing opportunity that we provide to students," said Carolyn Stefanco, president of the College of Saint Rose in Albany. "On the other hand, most of our students can't afford it without some kind of assistance."

The college and university presidents discussed eventually starting a consortium or some other kind of partnership. Some said branding together, as a region, might help attract students. The Albany region has more than 20 colleges and universities, with tens of thousands of students attending school here.

"Because of the way our region is constructed, we don't have a college town reputation. But we have a really large footprint for higher education," said Christopher Ames, president of The Sage Colleges. "When you talk about a consortium, it's one way to reinforce that image to prospective employers, people who might want to move here and so forth."

College enrollment has been declining nationwide for six straight years, and the demographics of the population are changing. Both of those create new challenges for university leaders.

"The non-homogeneous population growth across the country, it poses a challenge for us right here in the Northeast," said Grace Wang, interim president of SUNY Polytechnic Institute in Albany. "Another challenge is the demographic change of the students. So minorities have already become the majority of high school students, and are we ready to serve such a diverse population of the student body?"

Some college leaders said they believe they can work more closely with industry to meet workforce needs.

Wang of SUNY Poly pointed to a \$600 million investment by manufacturer Applied Materials on SUNY Poly's campus announced last week.

"It's changing from one institution and attracting one industry partner and looking at what we can do with that industry partner, into the big picture of, how do we build the ecosystem here in the Capital Region?" Wang said.

There were some reservations about creating a consortium.

Dustin Swanger of Fulton-Montgomery Community College said he would prefer to start working together and see partnerships happen organically, especially because they all still have to return to their campuses and be competitive to attract students.

Greg Dewey, president of Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, said he would like to see an audit of the group's programs to see the full picture before starting a formal consortium.

Rodríguez believes the first meeting was a good start, especially coming a few weeks after the November elections where the U.S. House and New York state Senate flipped to Democratic control.

"This is an opportunity with the changes that occurred, not only regionally but across the country, that we continue to emphasize the critical importance of higher education," Rodríguez told the *Business Review*.

The group of higher education leaders plans to meet again in the spring.