

BOOSTING NYS GRADS BY DEGREE

In SUNY chancellor's 2nd year, she is focused on wider college access

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SUNY Chancellor Kristina M. Johnson, heading into her second year as leader of the 64-campus state system, is focused on making college possible for more students, boosting completion of degrees and building a talented and sufficient workforce.

Johnson, 61, who succeeded Nancy L. Zimpher, will be officially inaugurated Friday in Manhattan as the State University of New York's 13th chancellor. She has been running the nation's largest comprehensive system since last September.

In an interview with Newsday this week, she reflected on her own experience, when a family and financial situation almost derailed her ambitious college career and how she brings that personal lens to SUNY's 430,000 students in four-year and two-year schools.

When she was a freshman at Stanford University more than four decades ago, her father, Robert G. Johnson, was diagnosed with cancer. At the start of her sophomore year, he took a turn for the worse.

"I thought about leaving school and just going home and being with my mom," Johnson said. When she didn't have the money to fly home to Denver, a counselor at the school found a loan for her flight.

Her father died on Oct. 17, 1976. She then found out she would no longer have access to funds they had set aside for college. Finding scholarships, she returned to school that year and de-

clared as an engineering major, following in her father's footsteps.

One of her goals, Johnson said, is to help students in similar situations.

To do that, she plans to expand upon the SUNY Impact Foundation, started by Zimpher, to bring in private-sector investments, allowing SUNY to take individual campus programs to scale systemwide.

Under Johnson, SUNY and the foundation launched a student emergency aid pilot program in December at seven campuses. The Gerstner Family Foundation and the Heckscher Foundation for Children donated more than \$600,000, so participating campuses can provide grants for students experiencing unforeseen situations to keep them on track toward graduation.

Helping even "one kid is big," she said. "Last year we started to prime the pump for philanthropic raising." It can take a number of years to raise a seven-figure gift, she said, "so you've got to develop relationships, you've got to show that what you have is worthy."

On Long Island, SUNY's multi-campus footprint includes more than 41,000 students at the four-year schools — Farmingdale State, SUNY Old Westbury and Stony Brook University — and more than 45,000 students enrolled at the two-year schools, Nassau Community College and Suffolk County Community College, according to preliminary fall data.

Along with increased private and philanthropic partnerships



SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson speaks at Farmingdale State College on Sept. 4.

and investments, Johnson said she will push to expand SUNY's "re-enroll to complete" program. It was piloted in the 2014-15 school year by 29 campuses, including SUNY Old Westbury and NCC. Through a student loan partner, school representatives reach out to former students who didn't finish degrees and encourage their return.

In March, the program was scaled up to 40 participating campuses, with Farmingdale State and SCCC among the additions.

The effort is showing success, she said. Between March and July, of 9,778 students on participating campuses who were reported as having withdrawn, more than 300 re-enrolled as a result, according to SUNY. More are expected to do so this fall.

"We didn't even have any money to give them. What if we

had some money to help them out and get them back in school," Johnson said, pointing to the emergency aid pilot program as a mechanism that eventually could be used in tandem with the re-enrollment program.

Johnson said she is putting her corporate and academic experience to use in moving the system forward.

Before becoming chancellor, she founded and led Cube Hydro Partners LLC, which operates hydroelectric generation facilities on rivers in five states, including New York. She is a senior adviser to the company. Johnson also served as undersecretary of energy with the U.S. Department of Energy during President Barack Obama's administration from 2009 to 2010.

Johnson spent much of her first year visiting campuses statewide and across Long Is-

land, listening to students, faculty and staff. One of her biggest take-aways is the need for more full-time faculty and diversity, Johnson said.

Statewide, 40 percent of the 33,000-plus full-time and part-time faculty members are above the age of 55 and eligible for retirement, according to SUNY. On the Island, more than 41 percent, 1,609 of the 3,909 full- and part-time faculty, are eligible to retire.

Johnson on Friday plans to announce a program, Promoting Retention and Opportunity for Diversity, Inclusion and Growth — PRODI-G, an intentional acronym — to create named professorships through partnerships between the system, individual campuses and donors. The goal is to hire 1,000 faculty members with named chairs within the next decade, she said.