

## *SUNY Stands Firm on First Amendment Rights as Students and Outside Organizations Test the Limits of Freedom of Speech Across Higher Education*

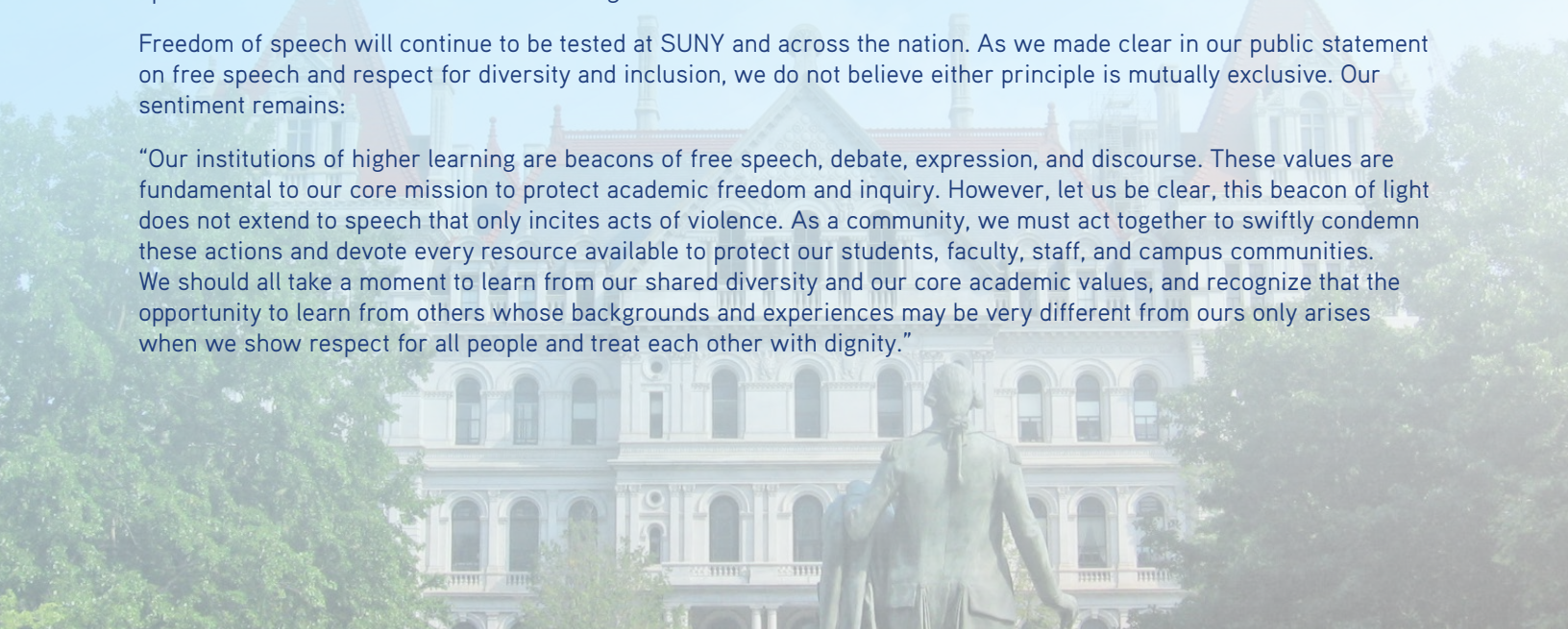
At the November 20, 2019 Board of Trustees meeting in Albany, the SUNY Board of Trustees and I clearly reaffirmed SUNY's position and our unwavering commitment to the First Amendment and freedom of expression on our campuses, and that acts of bigotry and hate speech are not SUNY values. Our statement came with swift action that we will form a task force to listen to students, campus leadership, and staff, and develop any necessary changes we need to campus policies, trainings, and how we respond to future incidents.

It is extremely disturbing to watch the increasing number of instances of bigotry, including racist, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and homophobic graffiti language and actions, on our campuses. In response to recent incidents on SUNY campuses, our presidents immediately acted, meeting with students targeted by hate speech, and communicating to the entire campus community that SUNY values each individual and is committed to providing a safe, diverse, and inclusive learning environment for all students, faculty, and staff. There is a profound difference between being allowed to study, reside, teach and/or work on a campus, and being welcomed, respected, and appreciated in that space. Our campus values do not stop at diverse representation among our students, faculty, and staff—they extend to ensure that every individual is meaningfully included in our campus communities.

Campuses are meant to be safe, inclusive environments where people with differing views are encouraged to discuss controversial issues. What happened at Binghamton University, where students met with student-led and outside organizations promoting a conservative speaker with provocative information about guns, is also not indicative of how SUNY defends our First Amendment right to freely express different ideas. Binghamton has a plan in place to resume open forums and foster discussion following this incident.

Freedom of speech will continue to be tested at SUNY and across the nation. As we made clear in our public statement on free speech and respect for diversity and inclusion, we do not believe either principle is mutually exclusive. Our sentiment remains:

"Our institutions of higher learning are beacons of free speech, debate, expression, and discourse. These values are fundamental to our core mission to protect academic freedom and inquiry. However, let us be clear, this beacon of light does not extend to speech that only incites acts of violence. As a community, we must act together to swiftly condemn these actions and devote every resource available to protect our students, faculty, staff, and campus communities. We should all take a moment to learn from our shared diversity and our core academic values, and recognize that the opportunity to learn from others whose backgrounds and experiences may be very different from ours only arises when we show respect for all people and treat each other with dignity."





## *SUNY Diversity Conference Opens Amidst Rising Student Concerns over Intolerance*

As institutions of higher learning, we take seriously our unique responsibility to our nation to pass on culture to the next generation, educate professionals, train a workforce, and prepare future leaders to serve in government and non-profits and work in corporations. That means providing the broadest access to a high quality education to an ever-increasingly diverse and multicultural society.

At the same time, it is difficult to learn if you don't feel safe, valued, or welcomed. This is exactly how our students, faculty, and staff feel when they experience acts of aggression, intolerance, and bigotry or bias. My vision as Chancellor for SUNY is individualized learning for our students, which by definition means our students, faculty, and staff learn in an environment where everyone is appreciated for who they are as individuals.

Earlier this month, SUNY hosted the 2019 SUNY Diversity Conference to convene campus representatives working on diversity and inclusion initiatives to discuss best practices and share lessons learned in achieving this vision. The conference opened with a compelling video on the importance of diversity featuring SUNY Board of Trustees Vice Chair Cesar Perales, Trustee Eunice Lewin A. Lewin and Trustee Robert Duffy. [Here is the video.](#)

The theme of the three-day event was "Envisioning Change in an Evolving Landscape." It was timely, as our nation and higher education systems continue to struggle with the issues of diversity and tolerance among students, faculty, and staff.

As noted, SUNY is taking action by launching a Task Force to tackle these complex issues head on. However, the issue of how SUNY manages diversity is not isolated to interaction among students. The conference also discussed our PRODiG initiative, which focuses on diversifying SUNY's faculty and staff.

That is why this annual conference is so important to us. It is an opportunity for our institutional experts to come together and bring forth new ideas, renew our commitment and energy for diversity, and develop a plan of action to follow through on SUNY's promise of creating a fair, equitable, and accessible higher education system for both students, faculty, and staff.

We are deeply appreciative of our partners who co-sponsored the event, including the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, McGraw Hill, National Grid, NYSUT, Sodexo, STEAMSuccess.com, Syracuse Cultural Workers, SUNY Press, TIAA, The Ph.D. Project, McLean Consulting Group, and SUNY University Faculty Senate.



## *UAlbany President Havidán Rodríguez Appointed Executive Director of Hispanic Leadership Institute*

We talk a lot about inclusivity, diversity, and mentorship as major priorities for our university system. As our student body becomes increasingly diverse, we must ensure that our executive leadership teams reflect that change. SUNY's Hispanic Leadership Institute (HLI) is integral to that goal. Its stewardship is crucial.

That is why I am so pleased that University at Albany President Dr. Havidán Rodríguez will begin his term as Executive Director of the HLI on January 1. He will be charged with developing and supporting the next generation of executive-level Latino leaders across our system. Governor Cuomo announced President Rodríguez's appointment at the SOMOS Conference in Puerto Rico last month.



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President Rodríguez has a lifelong track record of putting knowledge to work in the service of others. I am particularly proud of his leadership through disaster response efforts across Latin America, and with the recent RISE conference. I know he already serves as a valued role model to many Hispanic higher education professionals seeking to grow and advance in their careers. By graciously stepping into this Executive Director role, many more will have access to his knowledge, experience, and wisdom—and I know they will be better for it.

He won't do this alone. He will have the full support and resources within SUNY's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, under the direction of Senior Vice Chancellor for Strategic Initiatives and Chief Diversity Officer Teresa Miller. By maximizing the reach of proven and inspiring leaders like President Rodríguez, I am confident that the largest comprehensive public higher education system in the country is well on its way to becoming the most inclusive and the most diverse.

## *Meet-and-Greet, Fireside Chat with Student Assembly Leaders*

From pushing major strategic initiatives forward to meeting with elected officials to discussing the merits of new programs and policies, it's easy for leaders in higher education to get embroiled in our often all-encompassing day-to-day duties. Still, we must never lose connection to the lifeblood of our institutions and the underlying purpose for all our efforts: our students.

After an inspiring keynote address by SUNY Trustee Eunice A. Lewin, I cherished the opportunity to meet with Student Assembly leaders. Student Trustee and Student Assembly President Austin Ostro led an engaging and thoughtful fireside chat that touched on how far we've come, the challenges we face, and the critical work still left to do.

This proved to be a great opportunity to talk with students about some of our key accomplishments so far: launching PRODiG, further reducing SUNY's carbon footprint, doubling down on our commitment to ensuring student success through SUNY Achieve, and connecting food insecure students to healthy meals. We also discussed future themes for higher education, including the importance of embracing change, the role of online learning, and artificial intelligence and machine learning. Student Assembly members in the audience also contributed questions. Trustees Gwen Kay and Christy Fogal were present and participated throughout the conference as well.



It is clear that our student leaders share our passion for these issues, a strong motivation to act, and a deep feeling of responsibility and ownership for both SUNY and the greater world around them. They care about moving our institutions—and our world—forward. Like us, they want SUNY to be a better place when they leave than how it was when they arrived. Engaging with them and experiencing their enthusiasm is a reminder of why we do what we do, and that students have been, and always will be, our greatest partners.



## *Judy and Dennis Shepard Discuss Son's Legacy, Uptick in Hate Crimes, and How We Can All Be Activists*

Not a soul in attendance will soon forget our inaugural SUNY Thought Leaders Forum held at SUNY Global Center. I had the great honor of leading a conversation with Judy and Dennis Shepard. They generously shared the emotional highs and lows of their two decades of advocacy work, memories of their “precocious” and “fun-loving” son Matthew, and advice for the next generation of human rights advocates, some of whom sat just a few feet away, wiping away tears as the Shepards told their story.

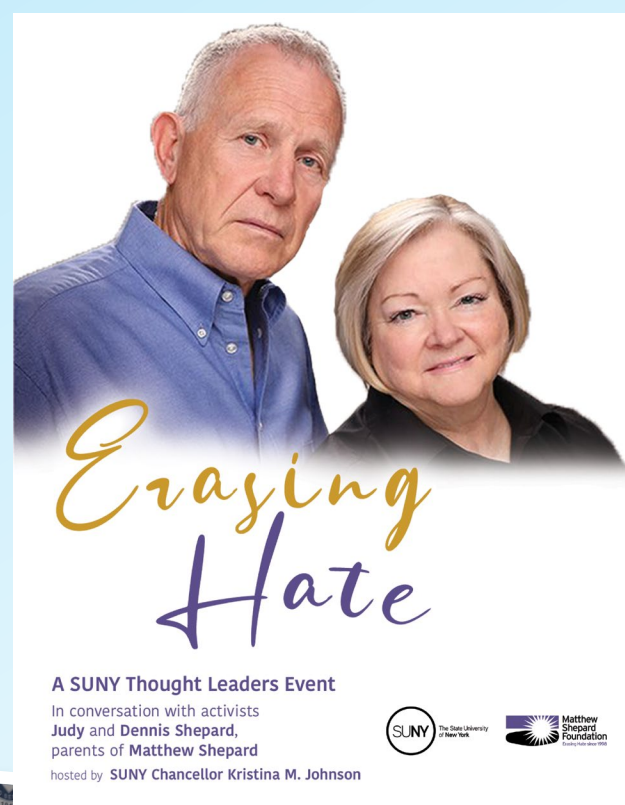
In a touching moment, Dennis himself became emotional as he recalled the first time he ever heard his wife speak to a crowd of young people. He remembered someone telling him that one of Judy's speeches had pulled them out of a suicidal depression, and how deeply proud he was that his wife—a self-described introvert—was saving lives by creating meaningful connections with people. Both acknowledge that their work is far from over. Judy says she is angrier now than ever, citing federal rollbacks of protections for marginalized communities, funding cuts for training and hate crime education programs, and the rise in hate crimes nationally all as threats to the work to which she's devoted her life. She says simply: “we should be past this.”

Still, the Shepards remain hopeful, and they encouraged students to do the same. Dennis and Judy also offered some invaluable advice for those interested in activism: know that you will hit roadblocks; changing hearts and minds doesn't happen overnight; and be patient, but also persistent.

Dennis emphasized that activism comes in many forms, and that by simply being engaged, by having conversations and by showing up to hold decision-makers accountable you are an activist. It's about making meaningful connections—just like Judy. It was

an inspiring way to conclude for our students, many of whom are learning how to channel their passion for a variety of noble causes. I know they walked away feeling that they, too, will make a difference.

I would like to thank Martin John, SUNY Student Assembly Vice-Chair of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, for setting the stage with a thoughtful introduction. I would also like to thank Trustee Richard Socarides, whose presence at the event was welcome, and offered the opportunity for the Shepards and our Trustee to reconnect after many years.







## *RISE Conference:* Higher Education Can Strengthen Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Efforts in the Face of Threats Posed by a Changing Climate

A recent U.N. report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns us that things are even direr than previously believed.

It stresses the catastrophe we witnessed with Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico two years ago was not an aberration. Climate Change is here, and we are on a trajectory for further catastrophe.

So, at a recent event where SUNY and CUNY convened universities and colleges from across the nation at the University at Albany for a three-day conference, our best and brightest faculty, administrators, and others from the academy explored ways higher education can strengthen preparedness, response, and recovery efforts in the face of growing threats posed by a changing climate and extreme weather as we strive to build a national platform.

To our credit, New York State, under Governor Cuomo's leadership, was actively involved in providing relief to the island. The Governor was there during six different trips to help and assess what more needed to be done. And I, along with members of my administration, campus presidents, and more than 1,000 SUNY and CUNY students, as well as skilled labor volunteers restored homes in the San Juan, Orocovis, Barranquitas, and Toa Baja regions.

Still, while these efforts to help communities in need were certainly well-intentioned, UAlbany President Havidán Rodríguez's own research showed the post-Hurricane Maria experience demonstrated several aspects of the university-community relationship in pre- and post-disaster environments that urgently need to be studied to be more effective.

The conference was a wonderful opportunity to build upon what we learned and what we can do to develop a set of strategies, protocol standards, and emergency response policies that are proactive and will lead to more efficient and comprehensive approaches when dealing with natural disasters.

## *SUNY's Police Chiefs Association 2019 Police Awards*

The 2019 Police Awards honored lieutenants, officers, and staff who played a key role in life-saving events, as well as others on the New York University Police force for their outstanding professional service.

The recipients were celebrated in November by the SUNY Police Chiefs Association in a ceremony in Saratoga Springs. The awards recognized several outstanding officers, and extended an expression of our thanks and appreciation for all of our officers across our campuses for their hard work that allows us to deliver the highest quality education for our students.

By way of video, I shared with them that their presence across our university system reassures us all. It affords us the peace of mind needed to maintain a well-functioning, world-class, and remarkably safe institution.

And that is no easy feat. Yet, this commitment to safety is demonstrated every single day by these men and women from our various university police departments in both big and small ways. Whether it is respectfully managing an excited crowd of students on a weekend night on campus, or more dramatic encounters like two of this year's honorees who jumped into a ditch filling with water to free a man pinned by a burst pipe, each member of our university police is willing and ready to act in an emergency, when suddenly, lives can hang in the balance.



## *SUNY Honors our Veterans, Waives Application Fees for Military Servicemen and Women, Veterans, and Their Families*

I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to both Governor Cuomo and the SUNY Board of Trustees. With the Governor's leadership and guidance and the Board's swift action approving an application fee waiver for veterans and their families, SUNY continues to define itself as an institution that supports the people who sacrifice so much for our freedoms.

Our action makes clear that we understand the deep responsibility we have to assist veterans who aspire to study, learn, and advance their lives. It acknowledges the debt owed to servicemen and women who so often struggle to secure the help and training they need to succeed in civilian life. It sends a message to New York State's approximately 750,000 veterans: we at SUNY are committed to doing everything in our power to support you throughout your higher education journey.

That commitment to ensuring success was reinforced just a few days before the November Board meeting at a conference of veteran coordinators, educators, and student veterans across SUNY. This two-day conversation held in Albany focused on the specific needs of veteran learners and how educators across our system can collaborate to meet them. One prime topic was wraparound services like food insecurity and mental health interventions, two areas where SUNY is already heavily engaged in finding solutions.

I was honored to speak before the group with Congressman Antonio Delgado, and I am pleased Trustees Christy Fogal, Gwen Kay, and Austin Ostro were able to participate as well.





## *New Leaders Appointed for SUNY Plattsburgh, Niagara County Community College*

Congratulations to Dr. Alexander Enyedi and Dr. William J. Murabito, who both received presidential appointments last month.

Dr. Enyedi will succeed Dr. John Ettling as President of SUNY Plattsburgh. He comes to us from Northern California where he currently serves as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Humboldt State University. His appointment is effective January 21, 2020. We can't guarantee that he's going to love the Plattsburgh weather on day one, but we can promise that we will welcome him to the SUNY family with open arms.

Dr. Murabito's promotion to President of Niagara County Community College (NCCC) has been long-awaited. He's served as Interim President at NCCC for the last two years. In that role, he led the college to successful regional accreditation from Middle States, as well as program accreditation for nursing and surgical technology. On December 1, he officially became NCCC's permanent President. No stranger to SUNY, Dr. Murabito previously served in interim presidential roles at SUNY Morrisville, SUNY Sullivan, and SUNY Cobleskill. We're lucky to have him.



## *NYS Mesonet Helps Accurately Predict Dangerous Flooding*

While December may have started with a snowstorm, the month of November began with heavy rain that caused dangerous flooding in communities across Upstate New York. That flooding was more accurately predicted thanks to the New York State Mesonet. Headquartered at the University at Albany and with 126 weather-detection stations around the state, we've built the most advanced and largest early warning weather-detection system in the country.

With a storm bearing down on Halloween night, Mesonet meteorologists were able to detect an additional two inches of rain in Hamilton and Herkimer Counties between October 31 and November 1. They did this by measuring soil saturation, which is an important predictor often missed by traditional weather radar. This information helped forecasters at the National Weather Service predict the resulting flooding. Those predictions inform everyone from emergency managers to utility companies to community leaders—people responsible for making quick decisions with residents' safety and wellbeing at stake.

Our ability to provide this information connects directly to our core values. Here, SUNY knowledge and expertise is being used to benefit the people of New York State. It's all possible through a key partnership with the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services. And for UAlbany meteorology and atmospheric science students, this is an applied learning opportunity that's hard to match. They get to see firsthand the real-world impact of the work they aspire to do.

