

Nelson Rockefeller and the State University of New York's Rapid Rise and Decline

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This report focuses on my research into Governor Nelson Rockefeller's role in the expansion of the State University of New York (SUNY) in general and the Buffalo campus in particular for my new book project, *The Business of Education: The Corporate Reconstruction of American Public Universities*. This manuscript seeks to rewrite the story of twentieth-century public postsecondary schooling in the United States through a reconsideration of both national policies but also case studies that show how a variety of institutions in different regions evolved into the sprawling, research-focused system of "multi-versities," which replaced the private, independent liberal arts college as the exemplar of American higher education. This project emphasizes that state universities have always been dependent on private benefactors because local, state, and federal governments never provided enough funding to support these institutions. Indeed, the transformation of struggling teachers' colleges into universities (like Arizona State University), the expansion of existing public universities (like the University of

North Carolina, Chapel Hill), the maturation of land-grant colleges into universities (like Michigan State University), the creation of entirely new branch campuses (like the University of California, San Diego), and the private bankrupt schools made into public universities (like SUNY-Buffalo) shows that partnerships between business interests, educators, and state officials were critical to higher education's late twentieth-century expansion.

Rockefeller was pivotal to one of my most important case studies: SUNY and its Buffalo campus. Like many states in the Northeast and Midwest, New York had long entrusted higher learning to private colleges and universities, like the University of Buffalo. Indeed, New York state never created a land-grant college under the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act but instead designated private Cornell University the state's land-grant institution. Indeed, New York would be the last state in the continental United States to start a university system. But SUNY's 1948 creation had been governor Thomas Dewey's attempt to seem in favor of mass higher education during his 1948 run for the presidency. He, in fact, had little interest in expanding New York's public postsecondary options, then largely limited to teachers' colleges. He dramatically left the campaign trail to sign a bill that created SUNY, but also delayed its commencement by a year, time enough for hostile legislators to repeal the law. They failed to do so in 1949, but that legislation still created a system in paper, not in practice. Indeed, SUNY languished for much of the 1950s, even after voters approved a 1957 referendum to expand the system. Then-governor William Averell Harriman failed to use this money, which made SUNY's expansion a key talking-point in Rockefeller's successful bid for governor.¹

Most Rockefeller biographers emphasize that SUNY's development was perhaps his greatest achievement as governor. Few, however, spend more than a few paragraphs on what he actually did to expand SUNY into this country's largest higher education system, which for a

time seemed poised to replace the University of California as the exemplar of American public higher education. Yet none of the branches, or the system as a whole, remained in the postsecondary schooling avant-garde, a failure that many scholars have reflexively assumed to be the fault of too much rapid growth.²

The governor's records show SUNY's history to be far more complicated. First and foremost, Rockefeller's campaign files reveal that he promoted SUNY's expansion in 1958 as a means of economic development, especially for upstate cities (like Buffalo).³ Many historians have asserted that this urban powerhouse of the once-mighty Steelbelt only rusted, like other former manufacturing metropolises, in the 1970s.⁴ Rockefeller's office files are an invaluable source because they have been preserved as his staff kept them; office memos, constituent letters, staff responses, and key reports remain together in the subject files that Rockefeller's aides created.⁵ These incredibly rich records make clear that he and others were keenly aware of a declining industrial base that was draining upstate counties of revenue, employment opportunity, and population in the early Cold War era.⁶ Moreover, his office files show many upstate communities considered SUNY's expansion as an economic lifeline. Their enthusiasm predates the period during which most scholars have asserted that "eds and meds" became important to city revenues and plans for rejuvenation.⁷ Excitement across New York state hence challenges long-held historical assumptions. Indeed, the files reveal that residents wrote to Rockefeller personally to draw his attention to the abandoned factories that many considered perfect for a SUNY campus. These education outposts, many hoped, would not just bring investments and people into the area but also offer the kind of instruction for children and adults who could no longer expect to find employment in heavy manufacturing.⁸

Rockefeller's gubernatorial files also reveal the complicated financial arrangements that imperiled SUNY's long-term financial health and ability to grow. Many researchers have already noted the risky financing woven throughout the governor's now-infamous moral obligation bonds.⁹ In the case of public higher education, the SUNY Construction Fund was of the utmost importance in funding expansion quickly without legislative approval. This work-around was in fact critical to SUNY's rapid growth because Rockefeller correctly realized that he could not find guaranteed support among legislators or even voters, who rejected a referendum to provide more money for public postsecondary schooling in the early years of Rockefeller's rule.¹⁰

Less well-known examples of his administration's university funding include state student aid programs. Early 1960s New York stood out in the nation for creating a means to help students find loans for their education. Historically, such financing had been largely in the form of short-term, high-interest loans available either through private lenders or schools. The 1958 National Defense Education Act had provided some small, short-term federal loans for students studying the sciences or languages, but co-eds largely remained on their own to pay for their postsecondary schooling.¹¹ The Rockefeller Administration helped students find lenders through the Higher Education Assistance Corporation, created in his first term. This executive agency clearly shaped the kind of programs offered under the federal 1965 Higher Education Act. The State of New York specifically worked with the kind of small banks, usually upstate, that had expanded into consumer loans in order to compete for customers. This program had the effect of both helping these bankers and infusing private capital into both public and private schools.¹² Competition and tuition were also pillars of the Rockefeller Administration's regents scholarships, another landmark program that provided a small amount of state money to be put

towards tuition for high school seniors receiving top marks on the state's Regents' exam. These funds could be used at any school in New York state, public or private.¹³

Few researchers have realized that this instate caveat was critical to Rockefeller ending private colleges and universities' long-standing, corrosive objection to expanding public higher education across the state. Rockefeller publicly celebrated these fellowships as an award to the state's best-and-brightest; his private files reveal them to be a covert means of keeping residents from going to school elsewhere, while also giving an indirect state subsidy to private schools (like the University of Buffalo) and offering public institutions additional state financing. Most private colleges and universities, except for well-endowed elite institutions, were heavily dependent on tuition and feared competing with far cheaper state universities for co-eds. Hence, Rockefeller aides continually rebuffed voters who wanted to use their fellowships at out-of-state schools, which may have been cheaper options or had the majors that recipients needed.¹⁴

This clandestine infusion of cash to New York schools also reflected Rockefeller's insistence that SUNY students pay to go to school. This mandate reflected his concern that undergraduates feel an obligation to their alma mater and subsequently shoulder some of their educational costs,¹⁵ which was reflected in his demand that CUNY begin charging tuition. City schools only relented after Rockefeller left office and Gotham's fiscal crisis made fees unavoidable.¹⁶ Nonetheless, his insistence had an unintended consequence on all New York schools: tuition remained critical to funding higher education and rates would dramatically escalate as state support declined.¹⁷

Rockefeller presided over SUNY's initial retrenchment, which had as much to do with a frustrated electorate as a cash-strapped state government. Those issues become clear in the struggle to merge the private, tuition-dependent, underfunded University of Buffalo with SUNY.

Most researchers have blamed campus presidents for SUNY-Buffalo's fraught emergence.¹⁸ Yet the gubernatorial records indicate a far more complicated story, which involved students, professors, administrators, residents, state officials, and national politics. Many residents embraced Rockefeller's ideas for using educational investment to regenerate this beleaguered city. Buffalo had been an economic and political powerhouse in the nineteenth century, when the Great Lakes had been the conduit to the Middle and Far West. Many residents wrote in to describe their vision of SUNY expansion occurring on the run-down lakefront, which would revitalize surrounding parts of the city with an influx of students, staff, and research dollars. Moreover, many were initially relieved that Rockefeller would hire from the local building trades, whose union members desperately needed jobs.¹⁹

Residents soon expressed numerous frustrations. Many distrusted new president Martin Meyerson, whose New York City roots, Jewish sensibilities, and years spent overseeing the University of California, Berkeley concerned the Protestant, conservative members of Buffalo's civic elite. They and their constituents complained that the merger that he oversaw seemed to progress too slowly. They moreover wondered why their children, who may have won a Regents' fellowship, could still not find a seat in a SUNY campus and use this tuition relief. Their taxes, after all, were supposed to be paying for new classrooms, instructors, and degree programs. These irate voters first blamed the slow pace of expansion on union rules that seemed to delay construction and then blamed Rockefeller's insistence on following new federal civil rights protections. Few scholars have remembered that the University of Buffalo's merger with SUNY also served as an early experiment in how to meet President Lyndon Baines Johnson's decrees to provide affirmative action for minorities. The governor and his aides' decision to follow this executive order frustrated residents. Union leaders, for example, refused to abide by

Rockefeller's orders, which created a standoff between the governor, local civil rights organizations, and trade union locals, and resulted in construction being halted for more than a year. Local parents, who were overwhelmingly white, sided with the white unionists whom they once blamed for the merger's deliberate pace. When these taxpayers expressed their concerns to the governor, they also wondered why minorities and student radicals had been admitted to SUNY-Buffalo instead of their children. These self-identified white working- and middle-class parents asked the governor what he intended to do for their ilk who struggled to afford the ever-increasing expense of higher education. Costs included living expenses but also rising tuition rates, which were necessary to continue funding a public system that had always assumed it would partially rely on tuition.²⁰

Fees soared in the 1970s, when more factories closed in upstate New York, a fiscal crisis gripped Manhattan, and inflation limited the spending power of all Americans. In this economic climate, New York legislators could hardly be convinced to spend more money on public higher education to ease the reliance on tuition. Politicians instead embraced austerity in all public services, which (as Rockefeller's office files revealed) forced the Regents to continually redraft their plans for SUNY.²¹

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center has hence provided me with rich material to understand both the distinct trajectory of the SUNY system and its Buffalo campus but also how such Steelbelt schools fit into a larger national narrative. The importance of an educational experiment like SUNY (an example of a private school becoming public in the 1960s) and the state-level financing behind the mid-century expansion of higher education transforms scholarly but also public understanding of the contemporary crisis in American mass higher education. By understanding the complicated public-private origins of research-focused, state universities, the

defenders of public schools can hopefully better defend these basic public goods and envision how they might be made truly accessible, affordable, and fiscally sound. After all, as Governor Rockefeller's files make clear, today's journalists, administrators, politicians, parents, and students cannot offer to protect, much less resurrect, purely public universities and systems if they never really existed.

¹ Philo Hutcheson, "Shared Goals, Different Politics, and Differing Outcomes: The Truman Commission and the Dewey Commission," 3-14 in John B. Clark, W. Bruce Leslie, and Kenneth P. O'Brien (eds.), *SUNY at 60: The Promise of the State of New York* (Albany: State University of New York, 2010); Tod Ottman, "Forging SUNY in New York's Political Cauldron," 15-28 in Clark, Leslie, and O'Brien, *SUNY at 60*; Wayne J. Urban, "James Bryant Conant and the Limits of Educational Planning in California and New York," 190-198 in Clark, Leslie, and O'Brien, *SUNY at 60*.

² Robert H. Connery and Benjamin Gerald, *Rockefeller of New York: Executive Power in the Statehouse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); Cary Reich, *The Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller: Worlds to Conquer, 1908-1958* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); James F. Underwood and William J. Daniels, *Governor Rockefeller in New York: The Apex of Pragmatic Liberalism in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982); Richard Norton Smith, *On His Own Terms: A Life of Nelson Rockefeller* (New York: Random House, 2014).

³ Staff discussion of talking points for the 1958 campaign can be found in folder 172, box 12, subseries 2, series 5, record group 4, Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (Sleepy Hollow, NY) [hereafter referred to as NAR]; education's importance can likewise be found in the issue books that Rockefeller staffers kept and archivists have subsequently broken down into folders, see especially folder 155, box 28, subseries 2, series 17, record group 4, NAR.

⁴ See for example: Mark Goldman, *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

⁵ However, the one drawback to these records: staff sent these records to be microfilmed, which is why they remain intact. However, they did not pay for archival quality microfilm procedures. As a result, there are no specific frame numbers to which I can refer. As such, I have referred to the material referenced here using the folder titles that precede the copy on the films and then designated the reel number, gubernatorial term, series, record group, and collection.

⁶ See, for example, the reports included in folder 287, box 23, subseries 3, series G, record group 4, Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (Sleepy Hollow, NY);

⁷ An example of this argument can be found in: Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸ Numerous examples of this initial constituent enthusiasm can be found in SUNY folder, reel 26, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

⁹ Smith, *On His Own Terms*, 374-6.

¹⁰ For an inside look at the SUNY Construction fund see SUNY folder, reel 26, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; State University Construction Fund folder, reel 26, fourth term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

¹¹ Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19-52, 121-164.

¹² See the background materials in Higher Education folder, reel 27, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Higher Education Assistance Corporation folder, reel 37, third term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Higher Education, General folder, reel 38, third term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

¹³ For information on this program see: SUNY folder, reel 26, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

¹⁴ Rockefeller's files even suggest that top universities needed state aid, see the Columbia University request for help in folder 138, box 13, series 21, record group 4, NAR; His records also show evidence of the well-known private school opposition to CUNY and SUNY, see: Higher Education folder, reel 27, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Evidence of these scholarships use to indirectly subsidize schools and quell private institutions' opposition to SUNY can be found in SUNY folder, reel 26, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Education folder, reel 71, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; SUNY folder, reel 24, second term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Education Legislation folder, reels 60 and 65, second term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

¹⁵ This insistence can be seen, for example, in the personal edit that he made to press release in regards to tuition increase but also stock responses to frustrated voters, see (for example) folder 138, box 13, series 21, record group 4, NAR.

¹⁶ For more information on CUNY, see: Sheila C. Gordon, "The Transformation of the City University of New York, 1945-1970," (Phd diss., Columbia University, 1975).

¹⁷ Urban, "James Bryant Conant and the Limits of Educational Planning in California and New York."

¹⁸ Patricia A. Maloney, "Presidential Leadership, Change, and Community: SUNY Buffalo from 1966 to 1981," 144-158, in Clark, Leslie, O'Brien, *SUNY at 60*.

¹⁹ See for example the files on Rockefeller's 1961 journey to Buffalo and the surrounding area, which included speeches, itineraries, staff notes, and constituent letters: folders 315 and 346, box 6 as well as folder 409, box 7, series 33, record group 4, NAR; Constituent letters, office memos, and official plans can also be found in Colleges and Universities file, reel 24, first term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

²⁰ Material on local frustration can be found in SUNY—General folder, reel 27, third term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; SUNY Buffalo folders, reel 22 and 24, second term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; SUNY acquisitions file, reel 83, second term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Minority Work Group: Buffalo file, reel 25, third term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; SUNY Buffalo folders, reels 29 and 30, third term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Buffalo-SUNY folder, reel 23, fourth term, series 37, record group 4, NAR; Buffalo Affirmative Action folder, reel 22, fourth term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.

²¹ See for example the changes noted to the master plan in SUNY folder, reel 26, fourth term, series 37, record group 4, NAR.