The State University of New York (SUNY) was founded at Potsdam, New York in 1816. Years later, the Morrill Act of 1862 led to the creation of four Ivy League land-grant SUNY colleges, which now currently exist at Cornell University. SUNY was officially established in February 1948 when New York became the 48th state to create a state university system.

Today, the State University of New York's 64 geographically dispersed campuses bring educational opportunity within commuting distance of virtually all New Yorkers and comprise the nation's largest comprehensive system of public higher education. The State University of New York's 64 campuses are divided into four categories, based on educational mission, the kinds of academic opportunities available, and degrees offered. SUNY offers students a wide diversity of educational options: short-term vocational/technical courses, certificate programs, associate degree programs, baccalaureate degree programs, graduate degrees, and post-doctoral studies. The University offers access to almost every field of academic or professional study somewhere within the system via 7,669 degree and certificate programs overall.

SUNY students represent the society that surrounds them. In January 2008, 19.9% of all enrolled students were minorities. While SUNY students are predominantly New York State residents, representing every one of the state's 62 counties, they also hail from every other state in the United States, the District of Columbia, four U.S. territories, and 168 foreign countries. SUNY enrolls 40% of all New York State high school graduates, and the total enrollment of 418,000 full-time and part-time students represents 37% of New York State's higher education student population. SUNY alumni number over 2.4 million graduates residing in New York State and throughout the world.

SUNY attracts the best and brightest scholars, scientists, artists, and professionals and boasts nationally and internationally recognized faculty in all major disciplines. Faculty are regular recipients of prestigious awards and honors. SUNY colleges and universities range from world-renowned community colleges, such as the Fashion Institute of Technology, to first-rate graduate schools and the nation's top veterinary school. The highly-regarded doctoral degree-granting universities are home to top research programs and attract experts in a variety of fields. Students study in campus classrooms and laboratories or work from a distance through the SUNY Learning Network, which provides educational opportunities to more than 70,000 students through 4,000 courses and 60 degree and certificate programs.

The University's motto is: "To Learn—To Search—To Serve."