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It’s Time to Launch SUNY Reconnect

New York State is home to 1.5 million working age adults who have already earned some college credits but have not completed a degree. State policymakers should launch an initiative, SUNY Reconnect, that can help adults in every corner of the state to re-enroll at SUNY, complete their degrees, and boost their chances at economic mobility.

by Melissa Lent and Rachel Neches

New York State is home to 1.5 million working age adults who have already earned some college credits but have not completed a degree—including over 900,000 residents outside of New York City.[1] Helping even a portion of these New Yorkers to re-enroll in college and finish their degrees is among the most achievable options available to policymakers to expand access to well-paying jobs and boost economic mobility. That’s because, today, most well-paying jobs in New York State’s fastest-growing industries—including healthcare, finance, professional services, tech, and advanced manufacturing—require a college credential.

Fortunately, state leaders have a successful model to follow: the CUNY Reconnect initiative. Sparked by the Center for an Urban Future in a 2022 policy brief, the CUNY Reconnect program has since re-enrolled more than 40,000 New York City adults with some credits but no degree to help them reach the college finish line—and over 6,400 have already completed a degree.[2] State policymakers should learn from New York City’s success in reconnecting adult learners to public colleges, and replicate this initiative statewide through a SUNY Reconnect program.

A SUNY Reconnect initiative could benefit hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers across every corner of the state. Outside of New York City, 15.7 percent of New York State working-age adults (906,949 residents) have earned some college credits but no degree. This includes fully 20 percent of working-age residents in Niagara County—the highest share of any county upstate. Other counties with the highest share of some-college-no-degree residents include Orange County, at 19.3 percent; followed by Oswego County at 19.1 percent; St. Lawrence County at 19.1 percent; Erie County at 17.7 percent; Rockland County at 16.4 percent; and Rensselaer County at 15.9 percent.

Eight upstate counties are home to more than 19,000 working-age residents with some college but no degree, including Erie

County with 86,534 residents; Westchester County with 67,119 residents; Monroe County with 56,741 residents; Orange County with 38,779 residents; Rockland County with 25,208 residents; Niagara County with 21,803 residents; Albany County with 19,806 residents; and Saratoga County with 19,107 residents. On Long Island, 225,000 working-age adults (14.9 percent) have some college credits but no degree.

Obtaining a college degree in New York State is increasingly essential for accessing both fast-growing and high-paying jobs. Among job postings in New York State but outside New York City that pay at least $100,000 (close to the state-wide median wage for experienced workers), 93 percent require at least an associate degree and 82 percent require at least a bachelor's degree.[3] Of the job postings outside of New York City that pay at least $60,000, 83 percent require at least an associate degree and 65 percent require at least a bachelor's degree.

Most jobs in the state's growing high-wage industries today typically go to candidates with college degrees. For example, 83.5 percent of workers in professional, scientific, and technical services outside of New York City have an associate degree or higher and 74.6 percent of workers have a bachelor's degree or higher. In the software industry, 85.6 percent have an associate degree or higher and 74.4 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. In the finance and insurance industry, 76.7 percent have an associate degree or higher and 66 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. In the film and tv industry, 73.3 percent have at least an associate degree and 67.1 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.[4]

The potential return on investment from new efforts to boost college attainment for the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers with some college but no degree is significant—both for the learners themselves and the state's economy. For example, New York State residents outside of New York City with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn about $1.4 million more over a lifetime than workers with some college but no degree. Similarly, adults with an associate degree can expect to earn roughly $380,000 more than peers with some college but no degree over the course of their careers.[5] Around 8 in 10 SUNY students stay in New York after graduating, contributing billions of dollars back to the state in economic activity and tax receipts.[6]

Investing in a new enrollment effort for New Yorkers with credits under their belts will not only serve to boost economic mobility but also increase economic equity throughout the state as well. New Yorkers with some college credits but no degree are disproportionately Black and/or Hispanic. Among Black working-age adults in New York State living outside of New York City, 21.3 percent have some college but no degree (114,700 residents), and among Hispanic working-age adults outside of New York City, 17.4 percent have some college but no degree (128,462). Meanwhile, 15.2 percent of white adults (622,477) and 6.8 percent of Asian adults (25,886) have some college but no degree, and higher rates of associate and bachelor's attainment.[7]

New York City has already seen the effectiveness of re-enrolling adults with some college but no degree through the CUNY Reconnect initiative. In addition to bringing over 40,000 students back to college—the majority of whom are New Yorkers of color and women—more than 6,400 Reconnect students have already completed a degree or credential as of fall 2024, including over 3,700 who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Led by City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams with support from the administration of Mayor Eric Adams, the initiative was initially funded with $4.4 million in city funding, which expanded to $5.8 million in FY 2024. The funds have been used to develop a corps of trained Reconnect advisers who help prospective adult learners navigate the reenrollment process, develop an academic plan that accommodates their non-college obligations, and support students in accessing financial aid. Some funds have also been used to help pay off unpaid balances, which pose a significant barrier to reenrollment for many students, although additional public investment will be

needed to fully address this challenge.

CUNY Reconnect is a significant achievement and will result in long-lasting impacts on the economic prospects of these students—and it deserves to be replicated across the rest of New York State.

In addition to the enormous benefits for economic mobility, state policymakers have another compelling reason to act: continuing to boost SUNY's enrollment, which is still lower now than it was before the pandemic. Undergraduate enrollment across the SUNY system is down 23.2 percent since 2013, from 418,917 to 321,657.[8] A SUNY Reconnect initiative could help achieve a significant enrollment boost, complementing recent efforts to expand access to postsecondary pathways in the SUNY system that are already yielding positive results (total SUNY enrollment has increased over the past two years, beginning to reverse a decade-long decline). In 2023, Governor Hochul and SUNY Chancellor John King launched an innovative new strategy to enroll high school graduates, including automatic admittance for seniors outside of New York City to their local community college. Additional enrollment initiatives include the SUNY Match, where students who are not admitted to their initial choices are admitted to participating campuses, and Transfer Matcher, where graduating students from SUNY community colleges gain direct admission to participating campuses. To support students in finishing their degrees, SUNY replicated the CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and Accelerate, Complete, and Engage (ACE) models to improve retention, lift academic momentum, and ensure completion[9]

Now, the state should take the next logical step and launch a new initiative to reenroll working-age New Yorkers with some college but no degree. Governor Hochul and the State Legislature should allocate funding in next year's budget to develop the state's first SUNY Reconnect program, and allocate matching funds to bolster and expand the high-impact work of CUNY Reconnect. A modest investment of around $15 million per year would help tens of thousands more New Yorkers reenroll in the state's public colleges and universities, produce thousands of additional working-age college graduates each year, strengthen New York State's economy, and generate billions of dollars in additional lifetime earnings for many of the New Yorkers who would most benefit from this economic boost.

ENDNOTES

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 American Community Survey one-year estimates. This analysis defines "working age" as ages 25-64.

2. Center for an Urban Future, "Supercharging CUNY Reconnect to Support Returning Students," November 2023, https://nycfuture.org/research/supercharging-cuny-reconnect-to-support-returning-students.

3. Center for an Urban Future analysis of job postings data from Lightcast, June 2023 to June 2024.

4. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 American Community Survey one-year estimates.

5. Ibid.

6. https://www.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/institutional-research/DOL-report-Issue1.pdf

7. Ibid.

8. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from SUNY System Administration, Office of Institutional Research via Open

Data NY.

9. SUNY, “Governor Hochul Announces Increased Enrollment Across SUNY Campuses,” November 2023, https://www.suny.edu/suny-news/press-releases/11-23/11-15-23/enrollment.html.

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