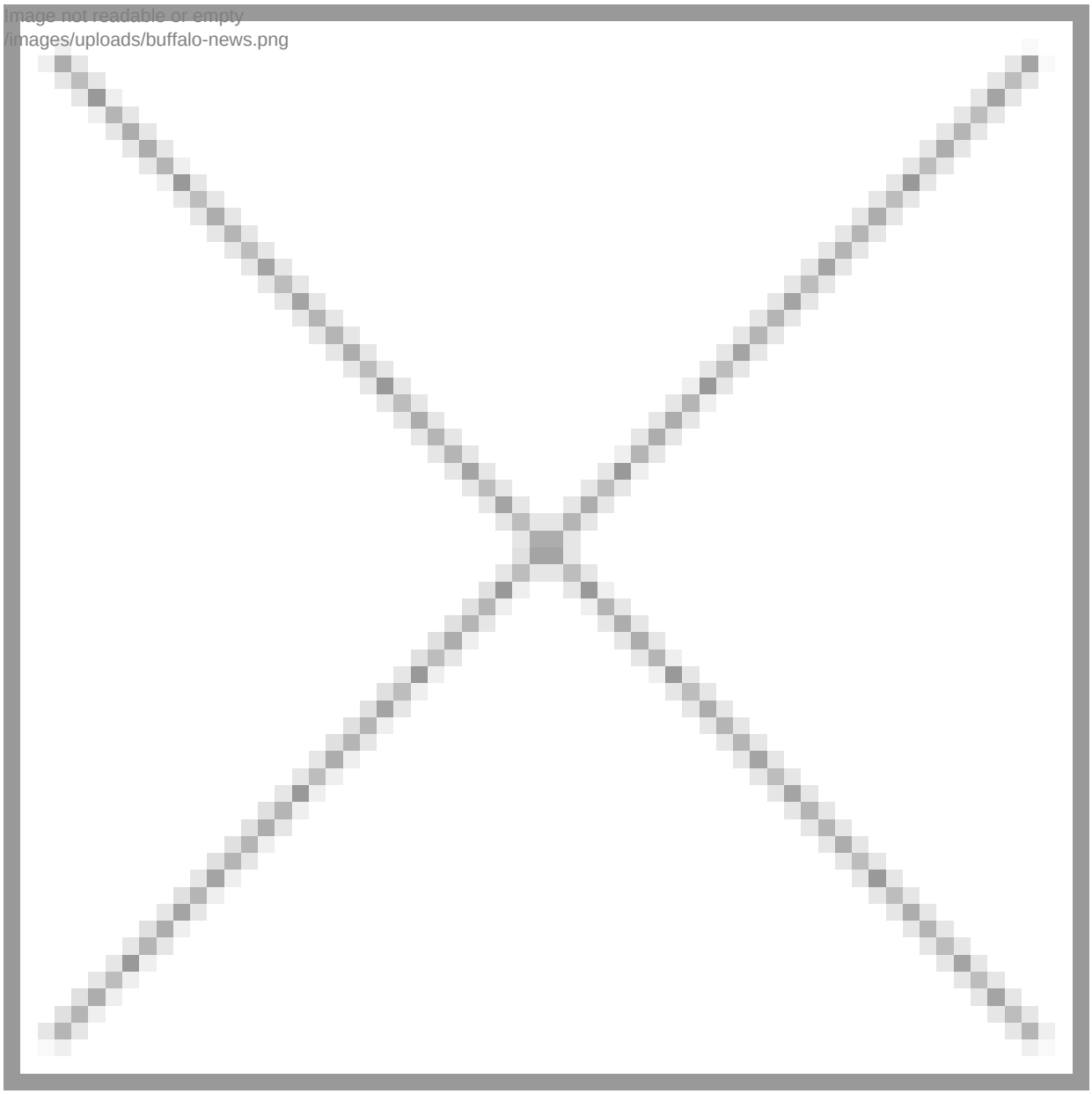


Commentary/Op-Ed - June 2013

Op-ed: New York would benefit by raising graduation rates

In June 2013, The Buffalo News published an op-ed by our senior fellow Tom Hilliard about the need to increase community college graduation rates in New York.

by Tom Hilliard



My organization, the Center for an Urban Future, just published a study about New York's community colleges. We were impressed by employers singing the praises of local community colleges, surprised at how many jobs now require a two-year degree and struck by how important these institutions have become to economic mobility.

But of the roughly 42,000 full-time students who entered community colleges in 2002, fewer than 15,000 (35 percent) had obtained a degree six years later. The community colleges in Western New York – including Jamestown (a 44 percent six-year graduation), Monroe (42 percent), Erie (38 percent) and Genesee (36 percent) – all posted slightly higher rates than the state average, but every community college had a six-year graduation rate below 50 percent.

Raising the community college graduation rate by as little as 10 percent would yield tremendous benefits: $42 million indirect earnings each year, $62 million in economic activity as graduates spend their higher salaries in their communities and $60 million in public funding going toward college graduates instead of dropouts.

There are understandable reasons why so few students graduate. Community colleges serve a large number of studentswith

inadequate skills in math, reading, writing and computer proficiency. They serve immigrants who speak limited English, young people who are the first in their family to go to college and laid-off workers terrified at having to sit in a classroom after 30 years on a production line.

But every student who walks into a community college classroom has a chance to graduate with marketable credentials, and there are things colleges can do to help more reach that milestone. At City University of New York, for example, a program called ASAP more than doubles the rate at which students obtain associate degrees in three years. Another program, CUNY Start, dramatically reduces the developmental education needs of entering freshmen.

Community college administrators in New York should experiment more with models like these and make student success a higher priority. Meanwhile, state and local policymakers should support working learners by expanding financial aid for adult and part-time students, fund pilot programs to explore innovative strategies and build the evidence base for more effective student success reform, and make community college graduation rates public information so that institutions will be more accountable.

Between 2001 and 2011, per-student state funding for community colleges dropped by 29 percent after adjusting forinflation. State officials should reverse this trend to help New York build a workforce equipped for the 21st century.

This op-ed was originally published in the June 30, 2013 edition of The Buffalo News. Thomas Hilliard is senior fellow in workforce development policy at the Center for an Urban Future, a New York City-based policy institute.

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