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Testimony of
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Before the
New York State Assembly
Standing Committee on Governmental Operations
Standing Committee on Higher Education

Joint Public Hearing on "DREAM Act" Legislation

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I am David Dyssegaard Kallick, senior fellow at the Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI), where I also direct FPI's Immigration Research Initiative. FPI is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research and education organization committed to improving public policies and private practices to better economic and social conditions of all New Yorkers. FPI's Immigration Research Initiative looks at immigration issues in New York State, and around the country.

In 2006, the Fiscal Policy Institute began our Immigration Research Initiative out of concern that an overheated public debate was making it difficult for policymakers to take up issues related to immigration in a calm and serious manner. So I am pleased to be invited today to put these DREAM bills in an economic and fiscal context.

First of all, let me note that a lot is at stake in getting immigration-related policies right. In our 2007 report, *Working for a Better Life*, FPI found that immigrants, then 21 percent of the state population, accounted for 22 percent of New York State GDP. Let that sink in for a moment: 22 percent of the state economy. We also found—there and in subsequent studies—that immigrants are in occupations up and down the economic ladder. Although immigrants are more likely than U.S.-born workers to be at the low end, there are very substantial numbers of immigrants in higher-paid, higher-skilled jobs as well—far more than is generally recognized.

Our studies show what immigrants are already contributing to the economy. The bills under consideration here are about how immigrants could contribute even more.

Going to college allows students to improve their employment opportunities. Better educated people can get better jobs. I have a son who just started his freshman year in college, and I certainly don’t want to suggest that the only reason to get an education is to earn more money, but there’s no room for doubt that going to college has an economic benefit.

The primary benefit of education is of course to students, but making it possible for more young people, including undocumented immigrants, to go to college has very real benefits for New York State as well. Their success is also our success. Better educated employees create more value for private companies. Better educated state residents earn more money, and as a result they also contribute more to our tax revenues.

So, yes, the primary benefit is to students. But higher education is not simply a cost; it is an investment in our future.

What about the argument that undocumented immigrants are in the country illegally, and should thus be denied all government benefits?

It seems to me that the same logic applies to higher education as for K-12 education. When the Supreme Court handed down its ruling, in 1982, that Texas could not exclude undocumented children from schools, the *New York Times* editorial board applauded the decision, saying: “It was intolerable that a state so wealthy and so willing to wink at undocumented workers should evade the duty—and ignore the need—to educate all of its children.” Indeed, it is not only intolerable, it is also terribly short-sighted to put higher education out of reach of undocumented immigrants, since the economic and fiscal gains of having better-educated residents are far greater than the costs.

Just as important, I think, is that these DREAM bills would help send a message that New York welcomes immigrants. We can see the negative economic impacts on Arizona and Alabama. In New York, we don’t want to go down that route. The more we can recognize and build on the positive role immigrants are playing in the economy, the better it will be for the state economy.

Federal immigration reform is desperately needed. But, as we impatiently urge the federal government to act, it is very much in our own self-interest as a state to help immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, to go to college, find the best job they can, and strive to reach their highest potential.

In the end, what’s good for immigrants will be good for New York State, too.

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