

Recognition is rapidly growing that educating incarcerated individuals results in rehabilitated lives and families, safer communities, and financial savings. Community college leaders welcome this development because for decades they have provided college education in prisons, despite a variety of obstacles. There is nothing more heart-rending, or hopeful, than a prison graduation ceremony.

The societal benefits of providing postsecondary education to prisoners are richly documented and reflect common sense. Individuals who have developed relevant skills, and have been able to apply themselves to an academic program, clearly are better positioned to transition into the labor force and economy. Those who leave prison with a college credential have much lower recidivism rates than those who leave without one.

Some community colleges have educated inmates for around 50 years, like J.F. Ingram State Technical College in Alabama and Trinity Valley Community College in Texas. Community colleges provide more than two-thirds of all postsecondary correctional education.

Currently, prisoners cannot receive Pell Grants, the bedrock federal student aid program, to pay for community college programs. That was not always the case. They first became eligible for Pell Grants in the 1972 Higher Education Act (HEA). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act cut them off in 1994.

After losing this federal support, many prison education programs were forced to fold. Since that time some states, local governments and foundations have tried to fill the void, but these scattered – if invaluable – efforts could not hope to replace the federal government, the country's largest student aid provider by a wide margin.

In 2016, the Department of Education (ED) launched its "Second Chance" Pell Grant program. The program aims to determine the feasibility and likely outcomes of making Pell Grants eligible to incarcerated individuals in certain conditions. Nearly 70 colleges have been selected. This experimental program's final results are not available, but participating campuses are enthusiastic about the opportunities that the program has provided. They have no doubt that its final evaluation will be positive.

Now it's time for the federal government to take the next step by fully restoring Pell Grants for specified incarcerated individuals (those who do not face lifetime sentences). Providing Pell Grants to prisoners made sense previously and makes sense now; growing awareness of incarceration's costs to society, and the likelihood of recidivism absent concerted effort, makes for an encouraging legislative landscape. The ongoing HEA reauthorization provides the perfect vehicle for this change. Both Republican and Democratic legislators have expressed their support for this concept.

Some will oppose providing prisoners with an opportunity to access a college education, arguing that it is wrong to use public funds to support those who have violated the law. Others will object to the aid's cost, adding that this support will crowd out that for law-abiding citizens. However, much less than 1% of all Pell Grant funds would go for this purpose. A targeted investment in educating jailed individuals, particularly through low-cost community colleges, will save the government money in the long run without needlessly punishing, or advantaging, those with criminal pasts.

The dramatic nationwide drop in crime should provide even greater certainty that reinstating Pell Grants to prisoners now is the right move. Community colleges are eager to take this mantle to help create a

more economically healthy, just country. AACC and community college leaders across the country lend their support to any and all proposals that will achieve this end.