

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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07.31.15

The Department of Education today announced a program that will allow some incarcerated Americans to receive federal funding for college courses, which has been shown to measurably increase successful transitions into society.

Research shows that education programs in prison improve public safety and save taxpayer money by reducing recidivism. A 2013 study by the RAND Corporation showed that incarcerated people who participated in correctional education, including college-level classes, were much less likely to return to prison and estimated that every dollar invested in education programs saves four dollars in incarceration costs.

Despite this compelling evidence, Congress eliminated Pell Grant eligibility for students in federal and state prisons in 1994. These tough on crime policies have created a growing underclass of formerly incarcerated people who are barred from productively re-entering society by increasingly numerous and onerous restrictions on things like applying for a drivers license, adopting a child, voting, and receiving federal aid for education or food in many states.

The pilot program announced today will restore educational opportunity for some of the more than 1.5 million people in prison in the United States, which will help them to get jobs, support their families, and become contributing members of their communities when they are released from prison.

Making Pell Grants available to students in prison is an important step in reversing the costly trend of mass incarceration, said EJI Director Bryan Stevenson. People returning to their communities after years in prison face tremendous challenges. Implementing a program that's been proven to help them succeed not only makes sense, it's the right thing to do.

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