

[Link to source >](#)

City Limits WEEKLY  
Week of: [February 2, 2009](#)  
Number: 673

## PREVENTING CRIME 101: MORE COLLEGE IN PRISONS

Increasing higher ed opportunities behind bars lowers recidivism rates and incarceration costs over the long run, say advocates. > *By Jarrett Murphy*

At a time when Gov. David Paterson is proposing the closure of four New York prisons as part of wide-ranging budget cuts, an advocacy group is calling on the state to spend money in order to save money—by funding college courses for more of the 61,000 inmates in state prisons.

The Correctional Association of New York (CA), a nonprofit organization that inspects prisons and recommends policy, says in a new [report](#) that college courses save taxpayers money because inmates with college degrees are less likely to return to crime—and prison—after their release.

Currently, about 1,200 inmates at the state's 69 prisons are enrolled in college programs, which receive almost no public funding. In 1994, President Clinton signed a federal bill that spent billions building prisons but, at the insistence of Republican members of Congress, eliminated inmates' eligibility for federal Pell Grants. The following year, New York Gov. George Pataki prohibited inmates from participating in the state's [Tuition Assistance Program](#).

Correctional Association executive director Robert Gangi attributes those policy decisions to "the very short-sighted political view ... 'Why give prisoners access to college education when so many people on the outside have to work so hard to come up with the money so they can pay for their children to go to school?'"

That's short-sighted, Gangi says, because inmates who earn a degree are less likely to end up back in prison, where it costs the state around \$40,000 a year to house them. A 1991 [study](#) by the state Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) found that 26.4 percent of inmates who earned a degree in 1986-1987 ended up back in prison by 1991, compared to 44.6 percent of released inmates who did not participate in the college program. Other studies have reported similar disparities.

The reason for that impact is simple, Gangi says. People with college degrees are more likely to be employed and to make a decent living. "They have a much better capacity to reconnect with families, to hold a job, to become tax-paying, law-abiding citizens," he says.

College courses also reduce prison violence by giving prisoners an incentive for good behavior—only those with relatively clean disciplinary records can take classes—and by producing "a stream of mature, well-spoken leaders who have a calming effect on other prisoners and guards," Gangi says.

Currently, there are college program in 17 prisons across the state. Among them is the Bard College program at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in Sullivan County. The New York Theological Seminary offers inmates at Sing Sing a two-year Masters of Professional Studies in religion degree. There is also the Niagara Consortium—a joint effort by Niagara University, Canisius College and Daemen College that runs a program at Wyoming Correctional Facility in Attica. The Consortium is the only prison college program that receives public funding – a modest \$227,000.

DOCS also offers GED, adult basic education and bilingual education classes at most facilities; those courses now serve more than 16,000 inmates, and their GED passing rate is 77 percent, well higher than the national average. Vocational education is also available at some prisons. Seven prisons offer a "certificate in ministry and human services" program and 14 run special education classes. These non-college offerings cost DOCS \$64.9 million a year. They are a mix of classroom instruction and correspondence courses.

According to DOCS spokesman Erik Kriss, 181 state inmates earned college degrees in 2007, up from 139 in 2006. Kriss says DOCS Commissioner Brian Fischer has made it easier for inmates to obtain college credits by expanding the pool of inmates eligible to attend and increasing the number of prisoners who can apply federal Youth Offender funds toward education. "The commissioner is actively looking for private partnerships now to expand college opportunities for inmates without costing the state anything," Kriss says, pointing to a recent agreement in which Cornell University, with help from the Sunshine Lady Foundation (run by Warren Buffett's

sister, Doris Buffett), agreed to expand its college program at Auburn Correctional Facility to also reach inmates at Cayuga Correctional Facility.

So far, prison education services haven't been targeted for budget cutting. Gangi says allowing inmates to receive TAP funding would cost the state \$5 to \$10 million up front, but save money later on by preventing recidivism. It's unclear how many more prisoners would participate in college courses if funding were available, or exactly how much the state would save if those efforts prevented future crimes, but one [study](#) estimated that every \$1 million spent on prison education prevents 350 future crimes – and the associated costs of incarceration for perpetrators caught and convicted.

"Even with the fiscal crisis, we think we have a shot at moving the issue in New York," he says. At the federal level, efforts are underway to get the new president and new Congress to reverse the ban on prison Pell grants.

Kriss says that while the legislature must make the decision, DOCS would support restoring inmate eligibility for TAP. "We are sensitive to the fact that a lot of people—law-abiding citizens—have to work hard and reach deep into their pockets to pay for education," he says. "But if an inmate is eligible for TAP just as anyone else would be, it's a good thing," because it works to prevent released inmates from returning.

When former Gov. George Pataki imposed the ban on TAP funding for inmates – which occurred as the governor was slashing state spending in general – his conservative supporters took a hard law-and-order line to defend the move. A spokesman for the now-defunct Change-NY lobbying group said of the TAP grants: "This is a classic prison perk that must go. Taxpayers should not be financing higher education for criminals." The Pataki administration, however, painted the move more as a bid to make fairer use of smaller budgets.

Fourteen years later, the political atmosphere around crime has changed: Even conservative Republicans are supporting programs to better equip inmates for re-entry to the community. Last year, President Bush signed the "Second Chance Act," calling for more funding for prisoner counseling and education, which the House had passed with overwhelming GOP support. But the budget environment is, if anything, worse than in 1995. That, says Gangi, is the greatest obstacle for the Correctional Association proposal to clear.

In its report, the CA also calls on the New York State Division of Parole to make educational attainment an explicit factor in parole decisions.

Heather R. Groll, director of media relations and public affairs for the Division of Parole, agrees that education is an important factor in preventing released inmates from returning, and calls for more educational opportunities in prison. But that's not the whole story, says Groll: "The Board of Parole takes many factors into consideration when making their release decisions including academic achievements, the nature of the crime, the inmate's institutional record including all program accomplishments, vocational education, work assignments and interpersonal relationships with staff and inmates. In addition, the Board must look at the impact of the crime on the victim or the victim's family and evaluate the inmate's proposed residential and employment plans."

Next week, the state Division of Criminal Justice Services is due to release the final report of the Commission on Sentencing Reform. In a draft report released in late 2007, the commission in a split vote [called for](#) an end to parole altogether. Gangi says that even if parole ends, inmates could still be given credit for taking college courses when "merit time" is calculated. Merit time is a way for inmates who have earned a GED, obtained a vocational training certificate or accomplished other goals to shave up to a sixth off their minimum sentence.

Gangi acknowledges that those inmates who are motivated and well-behaved enough to attend college classes in prison would probably fare better after their release than other inmates, whether they took college classes or not. But he contends that the statistical evidence shows too large a gap between the recidivism rates of degree-earners versus others to ignore.

The goal, says Kriss, is to try to reach inmates who might be less inclined to improve themselves. "College can maybe benefit these less-than-stellar inmates as much, perhaps more, than those who are well-motivated," he says. Preventing crime, he says, "takes a change in thought. That's what it comes down to."

- Jarrett Murphy