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Inmate Graduates: Why give free college tuition in prison? Start with savings to taxpayers

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By

On June 5, 15 inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility became the first prisoners at the 196-year-old lockup to receive college degrees since 1995, when the state abolished tuition programs. There was bagpipe music. Graduates wore caps and gowns. Among them are inmates serving life sentences for murder, robbery, kidnapping and burglary.

Staff writer Dave Tobin's story about the graduation ceremony struck a nerve with readers. Letters to the editor and online comments spoke of the difficulties non-inmates face getting a college degrees; the contrast between inmates receiving free tuition and guards trying to make a living without free education benefits (actually, the Auburn program offers courses to guards, as well); and general revulsion at the prospect of murderers and other serious offenders getting one more "perk" while living at taxpayer expense.

But a college education is not quite the same as three meals a day, a bunk, TV and a gym. Statistics show that up to two-thirds of inmates released from prison are back behind bars within three years — costing taxpayers \$62,000 per year. But the recidivism rate for inmates who have gotten an education drops dramatically.

The degree program was made possible by Doris Buffett, 84, sister of billionaire Warren Buffett. Since 1996, she has spent millions — \$2 million in New York state alone — bringing college to 20 prisons across the country.



Stephen D. Cannerelli/The Post-Standard

APPLAUDING graduates of the Cornell Prison Education Program at Auburn Correctional Facility are (left to right) Superintendent Harold Graham, state corrections Commissioner Brian Fischer and philanthropist Doris Buffett, whose foundation underwrites the program.

The program launched in 2008 at Auburn, where Cornell and Syracuse University volunteers had been teaching non-credit courses. Cornell now provides the faculty and Cayuga Community College offers associate degrees to inmates who pass courses in economics, biology, anthropology, genetics, theater, ecology and other subjects. Buffett has spent \$650,000 on books, teachers and administrative costs for the prison's 95 inmate-students.

Of the 88 students who have graduated from Buffett's program and have been released from New York's Sing Sing prison, none have returned. That's why state Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Brian Fischer and Auburn Superintendent Harold Graham support it — indeed, would like the state to resume covering inmate tuition. "The offenders in this program are people who don't get in trouble," said Graham. "And once they're out, there's almost a 100 percent chance they will not re-offend."

Competition for slots is intense: Of 150 applicants, 18 are expected to enroll in Auburn's program next month. That's a 12 percent acceptance rate — more competitive than Cornell or SU.

But why offer free college to someone serving a life sentence?

To answer that question, consider Buffett's initial motivation. Inspired by Viktor Frankl's book, "Man's Search for Meaning," about surviving the Nazi death camps, she said her Sunshine Lady Foundation has brought her great joy. "When you see a guy standing up and holding his diploma and he says, 'Mom, I never did anything to make you proud of me. This one's for you,' ... That's real redemption."

"Even if I don't get out, I think I'm a better person," said Christopher Shapard, 38. "I'm better equipped to help other people, possibly get them out and keep them out."

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