

Editorial: Bard offering aids inmates, taxpayers

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In the mid-1990s, following a national trend, state lawmakers eliminated funding for inmates to take college courses in New York.

Using taxpayer money this way was a hard sell to hardworking, law-abiding families who struggle to find ways to put their own children through the ever-escalating cost of college.

But, fortunately, the issue didn't end there. Bard College took up the slack, developing a program that offers free college courses to select inmates. And, laudably, that program has grown over the last 10 years, with the Bard Prison Initiative recently awarding associate and bachelor's degrees to its largest class — 60 students.

The private college's program is important and has many benefits, including financial ones, to the public. Most importantly, it gives inmates a chance to redeem themselves, to become better prepared to be productive members of society when they leave prison. Some have graduated, finished their sentences and have worked their way into management positions and involved themselves in human service organizations, etc. This year's class earned degrees in social studies, literature, the humanities and mathematics.

Why should taxpayers care about this program? Simple. It costs New York more than \$45,000 annually to house each prisoner. Too often, New York has warehoused prisoners, sometimes for nonviolent drug offenses, at great expense to taxpayers and society at large. Studies show that, on average, about half of the inmates who leave prison eventually return there, perpetuating a dismal and costly cycle.

In contrast, the Bard program, funded through foundations and private donations, has graduated about 250 students — and only about 4 percent have ended up back in prison. The program was devised by a student, Max Kenner, a 2001 graduate of the college. At first, it involved Bard students volunteering as tutors in local prisons but then grew into an academic program.

It is one of only a handful of such programs in the United States, but such initiatives have been expanding after public funds were slashed a few decades ago. Kenner and those involved with this program have made great strides over the years, as evidenced by its recent commencement, the 10th and largest one yet.