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State would be smart to educate prisoners

By Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, Commentary

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Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#)'s recently announced proposal to fund college classes in New York is bold, but not because it is radical. In the last year, calls to roll back the mass incarceration of American citizens have been issued by conservative Republicans and liberal [Democrats](#) alike.

Cuomo's proposal is one of a host of groundbreaking bipartisan measures now rolling off the desks of legislators this past year. In a year when [Grover Norquist](#), [Newt Gingrich](#), [Ed Meese](#) and others are championing the downsizing of prisons, and on the heels of former New York Police Commissioner [Bernard Kerik](#) excoriating the failures of a prison system that offers scarce meaningful programming, Cuomo's announcement is part of a broad rethinking about how to make "corrections" *correctional*. Three years ago, Newt Gingrich and [Pat Nolan](#) wrote "There is an urgent need to address the astronomical growth in the prison population with its huge costs in dollars and lost human potential. We spent \$68 billion in 2010 on corrections, 300 percent more than 25 years ago. These facts should trouble every American."

"Education changes people," [Brian Fischer](#) often commented while serving as the New York Commissioner of Corrections and Community Supervision. I have seen this process of change firsthand as one of the longtime teaching faculty in the Cornell Prison Education Program, an associate college degree program in collaboration with [Cayuga Community College](#).

In our classes at Auburn and Cayuga Correctional, we have heard students describe growing up in mostly low-income neighborhoods where some were told that they were slow, or worse, stupid. Others were chastised for failing to live up to their potential, a failure that might not be deemed surprising given the often extreme violence in the home and the economic insecurity many of our students faced as young children.

For most of our students, these are the first college classes they have taken and, initially, they are often uncertain about the expectations teachers will have and whether they can meet them. One or two courses into the degree program, students begin to radiate confidence.

Their excitement is palpable. The newer students are socialized into the norms of the classroom where tolerance, mutual respect, and hard work are modeled by their more advanced classmates. These are not men who will go home the same angry and aimless individuals they sometimes are when they enter prison. Education changes people.

In the class I teach at Auburn on theories of power, students learn that power is the ability of one person to get another to do something the second person would otherwise choose not to do. In our classroom debates, we explore the question of whether the ends justify the means. We consider whether remorse for power misused is demonstrated in the readiness of one person to do something *for* another person that the first person would otherwise choose not to do.

All these questions invoke personal biographies as well as political history. This is a political science seminar, not a therapy session, but as any student in college anywhere will tell you, the stuff of classroom learning is always seen through a template of personal relevance. College is a time of deep introspection. It is a time to figure out who you are, what matters, and what you will do next. Education changes people.

The real problem for the American taxpayer is the massive growth of the carceral system. Preparing men and women to return home as productive citizens is part of the solution.

College dramatically lowers recidivism to single digits, evidenced in the data collected by [Bard College](#) and by Hudson Link. If \$60,000 (the figure mentioned by Cuomo) "buys" us a person who is as likely to be rearrested as not, and it takes less than ten percent of that amount to educate someone who will stay out of trouble and even contribute tax dollars as an employed member of society, the bottom line is pretty clear. For the money saved by reducing our prison population, this is simply good dollars and sense.

The writer is Milman Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.