

NY Daily News - Get smart about felons: Why it makes sense for inmates to qualify for Pell Grants, too (Editorial)

8/17/2015

-Editorial-

Recognizing that a prison sentence should not condemn a person to being locked out of the job market, the Obama administration is pushing to end a 21-year-old ban on federal college aid for prisoners.

The Education Department plans to make Pell Grant scholarships available to a limited group of inmates nearing the end of their terms in select state and federal facilities. It's a level-headed idea whose time has come.

Research shows that enabling inmates to earn college credits behind bars pays off, as college-educated ex-cons are much less likely to commit additional crimes, and more likely to find honest work.

Prisoners have been denied Pell Grants since 1994, when Congress voted to cut them off in a get-tough reaction to a crime wave — meaning most now have no access to higher education.

College programs are available in just 20 of New York's 54 prisons — and only because institutions such as Bard College and CUNY raised private funds to cover costs.

Only 1,800 of the state's 64,000 inmates participated in 2014 — a shame, because the reincarceration rate for former student-inmates is 12%, versus 42% for the population at large.

Pell Grants are aimed primarily at low-income students, providing just under \$6,000 a year for as many as 12 semesters. That amount could position a New York inmate to earn a two- or four-year degree through CUNY or SUNY, if those systems opened prison-based schooling.

As U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently pointed out, spending less than \$6,000 for a Pell Grant is a lot cheaper than keeping someone in prison: "The cost-benefit of this does not take a math genius to figure out."

President Obama's pilot project is getting predictable flak from some Republicans in Congress. Tennessee Sen. Lamar Alexander claims a violation of federal law. Upstate New York Rep. Chris Collins charges that law-abiding families would be denied funding.

Wrong and wrong.

While Pell Grants are banned for most prisoners, Obama is acting under a statute that allows limited scholarships on a trial basis.

And contrary to Collins' argument, there is no cap on the Pell Grant budget. Washington finds the money for all who qualify — and a project for prisoners should be no exception.

To those who see a coddling of criminals, consider this: No matter what happens, 700,000 inmates finish their sentences every year. America would be better off if they emerge smarter, more skilled and with greater opportunity to earn legitimate livings.