

NYT: A College Education for Prisoners

**By Editorial Board:
Feb 16, 2016**

States are finally backing away from the draconian sentencing policies that swept the country at the end of the last century, driving up prison costs and sending too many people to jail for too long, often for nonviolent offenses. Many are now trying to turn around the prison juggernaut by steering drug addicts into treatment instead of jail and retooling parole systems that once sent people back to prison for technical violations.

But the most effective way to keep people out of prison once they leave is to give them jobs skills that make them marketable employees. That, in turn, means restarting prison education programs that were shuttered beginning in the 1990s, when federal and state legislators cut funding to show how tough they were on crime.

President Obama pointed the country in the right direction last year by creating a pilot program that will allow a limited number of inmates to receive federal Pell Grants to take college courses behind bars. The program will include colleges that either run prison education programs or want to start them. So far, more than 200 schools in 47 states have expressed interest.

Not all states are interested in breaking with the failed policies of the past. In New York, for example, raucous opposition in the Legislature led Gov. Andrew Cuomo to withdraw a sensible 2014 proposal that would have set aside a mere \$1 million in a state corrections budget of \$2.8 billion to finance college education programs behind bars. Know-nothings in the Legislature argued that the proposal was “a slap in the face” to law-abiding taxpayers, when in fact it represented a clear cost savings for those same taxpayers.

New Yorkers pay about \$60,000 per inmate per year — a considerable burden given that 40 percent of those who are released return within three years, most for economically driven crimes. But inmates who attend privately financed college classes before release fare much better. A prison education program created by Bard College in 2001 boasts a remarkable recidivism rate of 4 percent for inmates who merely participated in the program and 2.5 percent for those who earned degrees in prison. In addition, research has shown that the public saves \$4 to \$5 in reimprisonment costs for every \$1 it spends on prison education.

New York lawmakers who should have jumped at the governor’s proposal ridiculed it instead. Mr. Cuomo has devised a new plan — paid for partly with private funds — that does not require legislative approval. But such funding is unreliable and probably unsustainable over the long run. Moreover, the case for full public financing of prison education is stronger than it has ever been.

That case is laid out in a sweeping new report by the prison re-entry committee of the New York State Bar Association. The report notes that the number of college programs in the state’s prisons fell from 70 in the early 1990s, before state and federal financing streams were cut, to just four in 2004. The number of college degrees awarded to inmates fell from 1,078 in 1991 to 141 in 2011. At a time when a college degree is the basic price of admission to the information economy, more than 40 percent of inmates lack a high school diploma. The report calls on the state to

expand vocational and academic programs in prison to better prepare people for life and work after release.

The bar association report calls on all colleges in New York to refrain from using criminal history information in admissions, which has been shown to have virtually no value in predicting lawbreaking on campus. Applicants who check “yes” are now pushed into a supplementary application process that costs them more money and often asks them to produce court and legal documents that do not exist.

Nineteen states and 100 cities and counties prohibit public agencies — and in some cases, private employers — from asking applicants about criminal convictions until later in the process, when they have had a fair chance to prove their qualifications. The New York State Bar Association wisely calls for colleges to take that same prudent approach in the interest of giving qualified former inmates a better chance at a college education.