

# Restoration of Prisoners' Pell Grant Eligibility Overdue

By JASON BURFORD

A number of activities relating to advocacy for Restoration of Prisoners' Pell Grant Eligibility have been under way recently. Pell Grants were the primary, and only national, funding source for Post-Secondary Correctional Education (PSCE) until the eligibility exclusion amendment enacted in the 1994/95 Omnibus Crime Bill. This made prisoners no longer qualified for such grants. Since then, the number of prisoners enrolled in college-level programs has been reduced drastically.

## Personal Advocacy

One advocate who has not given up the efforts to reverse this policy is Jon Marc Taylor, PhD, who is a Missouri prisoner and recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy and Nation/I.F.Stone Journalism Awards for his series of reporting on *Pell Grants for Prisoners* (Prison Mirror, 1992). He is the author of the Prisoner's Guerrilla Handbook to Correspondence Programs in the United States and Canada (Biddle Publishing; 3rd edition currently under development). He also authored the series *Piecing Together a College Education Behind Bars* (Prison Mirror, 2002).

Taylor states; "Prisoners were excluded from Pell Grant participation a decade ago primarily because of the perceived inequity of distributing scarce government higher education funding to those seemingly 'less-deserving,' while denying purportedly more-deserving traditional students of critical financial state support."

The exclusion of prisoners from the Pell Grant program "failed to achieve the purported goal of increasing the number of grants issued to traditional students, while overall Pell Grant program funding increases did not keep pace with the above-inflation higher education tuition increases across the nation," according to Taylor. Traditional students were not denied Pell Grant financing because prisoners received grants.

Taylor is very familiar with the struggles incarcerated people face in seeking higher education and has called attention to several developing strategies advocacy groups are using to tackle this policy challenge.

## Diverse Groups United

Taylor is a member of the Crossroads Correctional Center (branch 4003) NAACP, which submitted the nationally ratified resolution calling for the Restoration of Prisoners' Pell Grant Eligibility. Some of the

factors that led to the resolution are; rising incarceration rates of prisoners of color, rising recidivism rates, correctional higher education proven rehabilitative results and its economic effectiveness, and the disproportionate negative impact on prisoners of color following the Pell Grant eligibility exclusion in 1994. Enrollments by prisoners of color composed approximately half of the program.

NAACP Resolution,  
III. CRIMINAL JUSTICE, #3  
Restoration of Prisoner's Pell Grant  
Eligibility (Ratified October 20, 2007)

...THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the NAACP calls upon the Congress of the United States of America to enact legislation to restore prisoners' Pell Grant eligibility; and  
...BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that all units and members meet with, educate and urge Congress to restore prisoners' Pell Grant eligibility; and

...BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that all units also educate their members to the encompassing socio-economic benefits of providing higher education opportunities to prisoners; and

...BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that these units avail themselves of opportunities to educate others to these benefits.

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education endorsed the restoration of eligibility for financial aid for "disfranchised populations, including prisoners." Along with CURE, CEA, and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, they represent a growing list of advocates for this important cause.

## National Efforts

Quiet lobbying by Charlie Sullivan, executive director of CURE and Dr. Steve Steurer, executive director of the Correctional Education Association, has gradually interested members of Congress in this issue. For instance, Rep. Danny Davis has assigned a staffer to develop the subject for amendment submission. They hope to accomplish the same in the Senate. People are being urged to advise those in Congress to work towards the Restoration of Prisoners' Pell Grant Eligibility.

## Growing Problems

The Pew Center on the States released a report recently that indicated that more than one of every 100 adults are in jail or prison at the start of 2008. The 50 states spent more than \$49 billion on corrections last year. This puts a tremendous strain on the rest of the economy.

In addition, surveys indicate that two-thirds of state prisoners that are due to leave prison in the next five years lack a high school diploma and roughly half are illiterate or drug-dependent. Only half reported taking any education courses or holding work assignments, and barely more than one-third received help for mental health problems or drug abuse. When released, they mostly find little transition assistance.

## New Options

A rising number of states already are diversifying their menu of sanctions with new approaches that save money but still ensure that the public is protected and that prisoners are held accountable, according to the Pew Center on the States report. Policy makers certainly can take a fresh look at the benefits that correctional higher education enrollments offer in light of the various factors involved. Programs already vary amongst the states but Pell Grants are a nationwide resource with proven results.

It would seem that enlightened public policy would call for "marshaling of the political resources of these disparate entities..." (according to Jon Marc Taylor, PhD) to advance the campaign of reducing incarceration rates through education.

Taylor emphasizes that "The inclusion of prisoners in the Pell Grant program **will not** deprive a single qualified traditional student of funding, **will not** substantially affect student's grant awards, **nor** cause an overall program cost increase. Such inclusion will, however, allow thousands of prisoner-students to return to the edifying experience of college classrooms."

## Conclusion

How these efforts will fare in the current political election cycle and in future years is hard to tell. Rehabilitative goals are certainly served by enabling rather than disabling actions. Educated prisoners are far less of a worry compared to the affects of sheer warehousing. Creative solutions are urgently needed and these groups and individuals are certainly not giving up. As news develops on this topic, we'll try to stay current in our reporting.