

June 12, 2019

Dear Senator:

The undersigned criminal justice, civil rights, education, and faith-based organizations write in support of the Restoring Education and Learning (REAL) Act. We urge you to support this important bipartisan legislation and request its full inclusion in reauthorization of the Higher Education Act currently under consideration in both chambers. The REAL Act would restore Pell Grant eligibility to people currently incarcerated in state and federal prisons.

The federal Pell Grant program was established to help make higher education and technical training more accessible for millions of low-income students. Post-secondary and technical education enhance economic security and job prospects – it lowers unemployment rates, increases earning potential, and expands career paths.

However, most incarcerated students who wish to gain a postsecondary education are currently barred from receiving Pell Grants. In 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (often called “the ’94 crime bill”) amended the Higher Education Act and completely eliminated Pell grant eligibility for people in state and federal prisons. As a result, the number of education programs in prisons fell from over 350 in 1990 to only 12 in 2005¹. There are approximately 700,000 incarcerated people released each year and 40%² of them return to prison within three years.

Studies have shown that recidivism rates drop significantly for people who earn a post-secondary degree. Post-secondary education and technical training can help formerly incarcerated individuals overcome obstacles, prepare for the workforce, and successfully reintegrate into society.

Mass incarceration is built upon excessive sentences and limited opportunities for rehabilitation. Over 400,000 incarcerated people are considered to be eligible for Pell grants if the ban were lifted. Expanding post-secondary education in prisons could decrease prison costs by \$365 million per year³. Workforce training and education in prison are key to unlocking potential and increasing the likelihood of success upon release.

The REAL Act would lift the ban on Pell Grants for post-secondary or technical education currently in place for incarcerated students.

¹ Rewriting the Sentence College behind bars: Keeping an idea alive
<https://www.apmreports.org/story/2016/09/08/prison-education>

² Serving Time or Wasting Time?
<https://www.rand.org/pubs/infographics/IG113.html>

³ Investing in Futures Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison 2019
https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison/legacy_downloads/investing-in-futures-factsheet.pdf

We urge you to support the REAL Act and urge the inclusion of a clean lift of the ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students in the Higher Education Reauthorization Act.

Sincerely,

African Methodist Episcopal Church - Social Action Commission
African American Health Alliance
Alliance of Baptists
American Friends Service Committee
American Humanist Association
Bread for the World
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Church World Service
Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE)
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces
Council on Social Work Education
Exodus Foundation.org
Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM)
FedCURE
Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FICGN)
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Friends of Guest House
Global Justice Institute, Metropolitan Community Churches
Healing Communities USA
Human Rights for Kids
Interfaith Action for Human Rights
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Justice Innovations Consulting
Justice Strategies
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of Social Workers, West Virginia Chapter
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Churches
National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)
National Human Services Assembly
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Church in North America
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Provincial Council Clerics of St. Viator
Public Advocacy for Kids
Safer Foundation
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Central Leadership

Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, New York
SPACeS in Action
Students for Sensible Drug Policy
The Campaign for Youth Justice
The Education Trust
The Sentencing Project
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society.
The United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
Unitarian Universalist Association
Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP
West Valley Neighborhoods Coalition