May 18, 2021

Secretary Miguel Angel Cardona
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

Our undersigned organizations write to request the Department of Education’s prompt implementation of restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students for the coming academic year. Formerly incarcerated, faith, civil rights, conservative, higher education, business, and law enforcement leaders have stressed the transformative promise of higher education behind bars. In the 116th Congress, 68 federal lawmakers cosponsored bipartisan legislation in support of Pell Grant restoration, which was included as a provision within the Consolidated Appropriations Act. We urge you to make implementation of Pell Grant reinstatement an immediate priority as you lead the Department of Education.

From 1965 to 1994, Pell Grant access for incarcerated students made postsecondary education a consistent feature of American prisons. However, the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act denied these individuals access to Pell funding. Even as college and prison partnerships declined precipitously, research would underscore the promise of correctional education for improving conduct during incarceration, public safety, and outcomes after release. The prior administrations’ development and expansion of the Second Chance Pell Experimental Site Initiative facilitated extraordinary learning opportunities among incarcerated students at select institutions. Prompt implementation of Pell Grant restoration would increase the scope and impact of these benefits in a more permanent manner.

The 116th Congress’ bipartisan enactment of Pell Grant reinstatement recognizes the innate dignity of incarcerated people and their capacity to pursue positive, constructive citizenship through postsecondary education. Moreover, Pell restoration will equip our nation’s corrections systems with a vital tool in ensuring prisons as positive spaces of rehabilitation and

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2 Restoring Education And Learning Act of 2019 (H.R. 2168 | S. 1074) (116th Congress); Expanding Educational Opportunities for Justice-Impacted Communities Act (H.R. 4073) (116th Congress); Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116–260) (116th Congress).


4 Id.


accountability. Pell reinstatement will help revitalize marginalized communities experiencing crime, overincarceration, and recidivism. A RAND study showed that participants in correctional education were 48 percent less likely to recidivate.\(^7\) Research documents that every $1 spent on correctional education yields $5 in savings on reincarceration costs—resources better used for violence reduction strategies, drug treatment, and proven public safety investments.\(^8\)

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened barriers to reintegration that formerly incarcerated people face; in a recent Council of State Governments survey, 75 percent of reentry service providers reported suspending services or closing and half fear a permanent end to operations as a result of the pandemic.\(^9\) Although we have experienced many losses together during this pandemic, data shows that the most significant of these disproportionately fall on the low-income and minority communities that are most often a home to our returning neighbors.\(^10\) Pell restoration will equip incarcerated students to navigate these challenges and contribute to the recovery of our communities.

The prompt implementation of Pell restoration for the coming academic year, and ensuring incarcerated students are accessing transparent and high-quality educational opportunities, will ensure these students have constructive opportunities to grow and contribute. Thank you for your consideration of this request, and the work of the Department in this demanding time.

Sincerely,

FAMM
Prison Fellowship
American Civil Liberties Union
College and Community Fellowship
Consortium of Christian Colleges and Universities
Correctional Leaders Association
Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology
Operation Restoration
R Street Institute
Safer Foundation
The Sentencing Project

Cc:

The Honorable Brian Schatz
The Honorable Mike Lee
The Honorable Richard Durbin
The Honorable Jim Banks

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The Honorable Danny Davis
The Honorable David Trone
The Honorable James Lankford
The Honorable Kevin Cramer
The Honorable Virginia Foxx
The Honorable Bobby Scott
The Honorable Patty Murray
The Honorable Richard Burr
The Honorable Merrick Garland
Director Melissa Rodgers
Mr. Chiraag Bains
Mr. James Kvaal
Acting Assistant Secretary Michelle Cooper
Deputy Chief Operating Officer Robin Minor