



475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1626 | New York, NY 10115 | collegeandcommunity.org

TESTIMONY REGARDING REPEALING PARAGRAPH SUBDIVISION b(1-v) and 6(d) OF EDUCATION LAW 2022 JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING – HIGHER EDUCATION FEBRUARY 7, 2022

Thank you distinguished Committee Members. My name is Romarilyn Ralston and I am the Executive Director of College & Community Fellowship - a New York City nonprofit that operates at the City, State and Federal level helping women and families most harmed by mass criminalization gain equitable access to opportunity and higher education through programs and combating the issues they face systemically through policy change. One such issue is the denial of financial aid to those incarcerated. New York is in the minority of states that bans its needs-based financial assistance, the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), to those inside.

I come before you today as a formerly incarcerated woman understanding, all too well, the value of access to education inside prison. I spent 23 years behind bars where I learned how to advocate for myself, organize, and inspire other women to become leaders. It's also where I fell in love with higher education.

I had the opportunity to take my first college class in 1990, prior to the 1994 Crime Bill, which eliminated access to Pell Grants for incarcerated students. In taking that class, I was really interested in trying to understand how I became incarcerated and what conditions within society work together to put people behind bars. I was in this classroom with approximately 30 other women, most of us serving life sentences, but all brilliant, incredible human beings that we're seeking some type of transformation through higher education. From that point forward, things just started to click for us.

Education has a tendency to open your mind. It's a portal to the universe. And when you're incarcerated, oftentimes, higher education inspires not just hope, but also the ability to think critically about your situation. Many incarcerated people want to understand how they became incarcerated and what systems are at play to perpetuate cycles of incarceration. This is especially true when you're looking around a prison yard and you're seeing that the majority of the people look like you.

Once funding was eliminated for incarcerated students, it left a void in our lives. With access to college, we became lifelong learners. We had started to transform our lives, because we were finally able to dream and be hopeful. In the absence of college, we lost more than just classes. We lost camaraderie and an identity we all shared that followed us outside of the classroom and into the prison yard. It wasn't just about us getting college, it was so much more than that. It was socialization, community, and learning how to engage with the world.

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Nelson Mandela said that “education is the most powerful weapon one can use to change the world.” And when you see that transformative power of education taking place in others, you say, “wow, that's incredible”. But when you see it taking place in yourself, it's remarkable.

Education reduces all types of harms, because it transforms the individual. I am lucky enough to have had access to education, albeit for a brief time, inside prison. It should not be a matter of privilege or chance whether one has access. It should be seen as an opportunity to deploy our collective resources as a society into the minds of people who are hungry for change and understanding.

Because of that first college course and the seed it planted in me, I now think of my incarceration as an experience, and not as something that will hold me hostage for the rest of my life. I can navigate barriers more fluidly so that I can move up the economic ladder. I can win parole. I can work in a university. I can be an executive director.

When you give people the chance to learn, you give everyone the opportunity to do better.

That is why I'm asking you to repeal the decades long ban on TAP, as worded in the executive budget proposal. The bill to repeal this was introduced in 1999 and has never made it out of committee. It is past due that it is prioritized in both the Senate and Assembly budgets one-house budgets. A strong message needs to be sent that New York is truly committed to educational equity for all.