

Dear Members of the Higher Education Committee:

I was released from prison forty-seven days ago after serving sixteen years. Today, I am a mentor and advocate for Community Connections for Youth. I have been fortunate to have exceptional support and opportunities since coming home. However, the blessings in my life started once I earned my Bachelor's degree through the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI). The education I received radically changed the trajectory of my life. Giving me the tools I need in order to obtain success in this new journey I have embarked on. If more incarcerated people had access to programs like BPI, more of them, like me, would go on to defy expectations of who college is for and where it might lead.

In her January 5, 2022 State of the State address, New York Governor Kathy Hochul pledged to “restore the Tuition Assistance Program for incarcerated people.” I urge the legislature to work with the Governor to repeal the ban on TAP to incarcerated individuals. I am a constituent of Assembly Member Chris Burdick and Senator Shelly B. Mayer.

Providing college opportunities in prison has been found to deliver strong employment outcomes, develop employer-demanded skills, make prisons safer, and strengthen pathways to successful reentry. These programs also hold the unique potential to improve students' lives, help narrow racial and economic equity gaps in postsecondary attainment and workforce participation, strengthen local economies and communities, and disrupt cycles of incarceration that continue to target, harm, and limit opportunity for Black and Brown people and people from low-income backgrounds.

In December 2021, *Justice Quarterly* released a study by the Yale policy Lab further demonstrating how higher education in prison reduces recidivism. In that study, Denney and Tynes find that participation in a college in prison program leads to a “large and significant reduction in recidivism rates” and that people with “higher levels of participation” in a college in prison program recidivate at lower levels. **The recidivism rate for BPI students who earn an AA degree is 8.7% but that of students who go on to earn a BA degree falls to 3.1%.** In New York, 90% of BPI alumni have never returned to prison over the past 20 years. That's a rate of success in stark contrast to New York's average recidivism rate of about 40% within three years.

As you know, restoring TAP funding to incarcerated people will increase public safety, save taxpayer dollars, and create extraordinary inroads to college in communities we most often fail to engage in higher education. It is how the state can invest in people and educate over prisons and punishment.

Thank you,

Alexander Mitchell

Mentor and Advocate for Community Connections for Youth