Essay about Governor Cuomo's plan to offer college programs in prisons

Submitted by Glenn Altschuler and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein on March 3, 2014 - 3:00am

A number of New York state legislators have responded to Governor Andrew Cuomo's recent proposal to provide state funding for college programs in prison with a string of rhetorical questions: “Help a convict, or help a kid?” “Convict or Eagle Scout?” “Rob a bank and attend Attica U?”

Although these sound bites slight the seriousness of their subject, Cuomo’s critics raise a fundamentally important question: When low- and middle-income students are burdened by tens of thousands of dollars of debt, how can government support for college prison programs be justified?

And the issue matters not only in New York State, where Cuomo’s proposal has captured public attention, but nationwide, where the idea of promoting college education in prisons is mostly ignored by politicians fearful of the kinds of attacks Cuomo is receiving.

We agree that any argument for funding college courses and/or degrees for prison inmates must reckon with the reality of the financial pressure on students who incur onerous college loans only to face an uncertain job market. In New York State, 6 out of 10 college seniors graduate with debt averaging $25,537, a reality not lost on some of our students in the Cayuga Community College-Cornell University Prison Education Program. Many men in our program have sons, daughters, nieces and nephews on the outside who are struggling to pay their own college loans.

That said, approaching college programs for prison inmates as a matter of “them or us,” the middle class or the undeserving poor, distorts what is at stake. This happened before. In the mid-1990s, Congress eliminated the use of federal Pell Grants for college programs in prison in response to critics who claimed that they drew resources away from worthy young men and women who were struggling to pay their way through college.

That was misguided then, and it remains so now.

First of all, the cost is relatively small. Governor Cuomo has proposed 10 programs, each with about 100 students, at a cost of $5,000 per individual that totals about $5 million. Compare this to the financial support available to New York college students more generally. In 2013, close to $2 billion in federal Pell Grants were disbursed to about 97,000 students in New York State, a figure that does...
not include a vast array of other federal and state as well as private scholarship and loan money available generally to students in New York’s two- and four-year colleges.

Second, the us-vs.-them frame is blind to the crime reduction and tax benefits that even a small college-educated prison population can deliver. College programs lower the incidence of crime both inside the prison and beyond its walls. Facility superintendents are usually eager to have college programs. A good discipline record is required to join and remain in the program. In those facilities with college classes, the incentive for staying out of trouble rises sharply.

When college-educated individuals are released to the street, recidivism drops dramatically. The Bard and Hudson Link prison education programs record low single digit return-to-prison rates of their students and graduates. A careful, synthetic analysis of multiple studies [2] done in Ohio reports college as contributing to a one-third decline in reincarceration.

Even under conservative assumptions, the program will pay for itself and more. Assuming a $5 million cost, the release of no more than one-tenth of the 100 students in each of the 10 graduating classes, and recidivism rates of not more than 25 percent (much above the single-digit recidivism rate that New York State’s college programs currently experience), the savings during the first year are close to $5 million. Compounded over many years, they are substantial.

Third, it would be a mistake to see the benefits only in quantifiable monetary terms. Many student recipients of a college education behind bars play a role in urging young members of their own families to stay in school, to work hard, and to consider college. On returning home, many of these former students become passionate mentors of younger adults who face the same choices they once did. And the “us-them” divide is blurred still further in that many prison students become us returning to OUR families, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and our communities.

We ask that voters and our elected representatives act on the proposition that all New Yorkers – and all Americans – are better off by ridding ourselves of the legacy of binaries that force us to choose between the morally pure and the undeserving poor and by implementing public policies that reflect a commitment to provide education free of any racial, class, or moral litmus test.

Glenn Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. Mary Fainsod Katzenstein is the Stephen and Evalyn Milman Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Editorial Tags:
Crime [3]

Image Caption:
A class in Cornell’s prison program

Source URL: http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/03/03/essay-about-governor-cuomos-plan-offer-college-programs-prisons?width=775&height=500&iframe=true

Links: