



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

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

I seek the repeal of paragraph b(i-v) and 6(d) of section 661 of education law. In other words I seek the repeal of the ban on the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for incarcerated people. In other words, I seek what is owed.

In 1994 the Violent Crime Bill banned incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell. In 1995 New York State banned TAP. This eviscerated college-in-prison programming. This did not reduce crime. This did not make anyone safer. Instead prison was idling. We were stuck. Stuck in the mindset that had led to incarceration. Stuck in survival mode. Prison was reduced to the four walls that held us. Upon release, we were being set up to continue the cycle of incarceration that led us there in the first place. Not just us but the generations that followed us.

Education is a disrupting force. It is not a privilege. It is the difference between survival and thriving.

Many likely cannot recall when the concept of education was introduced to them as a pathway. Both my partner and I were incarcerated. Growing up we did not hear about education. My brothers and sisters all dropped out of high school. This is true for many of us who find ourselves trapped behind prison walls. High school dropout rate is one of the most significant indicators of incarceration. Studies show those who spend time in prison come from communities that have been divested of resources. These are segregated communities, disproportionately Black and Brown. There are few schools, parks, or libraries.

Once education was introduced it changed the course of our lives. My partner was inside for 30 years. While incarcerated, we both felt the weight of time. Our lives were frozen.

When he found education, that became his focus. He began working toward his associates degree. It provided a critical lens through which he could view himself and his relationship to those around him. Nourished by that, he wanted more and more. After becoming a teacher's assistant, the vice principal recognized his potential. The school asked that he teach classes. He mentored and taught GED courses to the men with the longest sentences, and they respected him and chose education because he was their peer. They started to believe that if he could do it, they could too.

Executive Director
Romarilyn Ralston

Board Chair
Irene Branche

Board of Directors

Onyekachi Akoma
Cynthia Alberts
Barbara Calderoni
Barat Dickman
Liza Eaton
Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin
Jacki Kelly
Maura Kernan
Jane Pauls

Anthony Smith
Joy Thoma
Dawn Walker
Bridget Williams

Founder
Barbara Martinsons

Chair Emeritus
Peter Bakstansky

The core of understanding the power of education is to acknowledge that for most incarcerated people this is not a second chance at a life with education but a first. Our introduction is often inside those prison walls.

And education is not simply a means to an end. Education has enormous benefits both inside and outside prison that can all be supported by statistics from the increased employment opportunities to reduced reliance on government assistance. But education's import comes from what it opens up. Like a dictionary, you fan open the pages and find the meaning of a word. Your world is opened a little more. The more meanings you find out the more words you read, the more the world opens up. Now you have options.

I began fighting for education in prison before I met my partner. I was in a program where a woman shared that she was able to begin her educational journey inside but the program was removed. She said it felt like they extended her sentence. Now it would be years more until she was able to obtain her degree and years more until she could find a job. This seemed so unjust that I was drawn to advocate for education.

My partner is now seeking his Masters in theology. I am the first person in my family to go to college and because of my degree, my daughter went to college. I received my masters in human services. That's the cascading impact of education. Everyone within our immediate and extended circles has been uplifted. We now have a choice about how we live our lives.

We ask that you extend the same to the thousands behind bars in New York State. The federal government has restored Pell. NY is now in the minority of states with a ban on its financial aid. Please prioritize repealing the ban on TAP, as it appears in the Executive Budget in each of the one-house budgets. We cannot afford to wait.