



**College & Community Fellowship**  
**#TurnOnTheTAP Campaign**  
**TESTIMONY FOR THE NEW YORK STATE HIGHER EDUCATION BUDGET**  
**HEARING**

Regarding the New York State Executive Budget Proposals  
State Fiscal Year 2020-2021  
February 4, 2020

My name is Ivelisse Gilestra, and I am the Community Organizer for College & Community Fellowship (CCF). For 20 years, CCF has provided direct services to formerly incarcerated women including helping them earn their college degrees. We also address the barriers we see in the delivery of our work on a systemic level. Our #TurnOnTheTap campaign seeks passage of S790 (Montgomery)/A3975 (Aubry) to restore the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for those incarcerated. Our partners in this work include college-in-prison program providers, faith-leaders, directly impacted advocates, and social justice organizations.

In 1995 incarcerated individuals were banned from receiving TAP grants. This was one year after the Federal Government banned Pell for those behind bars. Prior to that point, college-in-prison programs operated successfully in New York State for decades.

The Executive Chamber FY 2021 budget briefing book states: “New York is leading the nation in expanding access to a quality and affordable college education.”<sup>1</sup> Until TAP is available to everyone, this is false. Nineteen states provide state financial assistance to incarcerated individuals.<sup>2</sup> New York is not one of them.

Both the federal and all state governments have some kind of a need-based program to provide financial assistance to obtain post-secondary education.<sup>3</sup> By excluding incarcerated people, New York ignores those who need education the most.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/governor.ny.gov/files/atoms/files/FY2021BudgetBook.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://cdn.theconversation.com/static\\_files/files/596/CUSTER.pdf?1557867364](https://cdn.theconversation.com/static_files/files/596/CUSTER.pdf?1557867364)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/highered/12d1.pdf>

## **The predictors of incarceration include growing up in marginalized communities.**

Once a community is plagued by incarceration, the cycle continues. A Brookings Institution study mapped prisoners' places of birth and found those eventually imprisoned were "disproportionately likely to have grown up in socially isolated and segregated neighborhoods with high rates of child poverty and in predominantly African American or American Indian neighborhoods."<sup>4</sup> The famous "seven neighborhoods study," conducted by incarcerated individuals at Greenhaven facility, found that at the time 75% of New York state's prison population came from just seven neighborhoods in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

These same communities are also characterized by low rates of education attainment. Individuals who drop out of high school are 47 times more likely to end up behind bars than similarly-aged peers with college degrees.<sup>6</sup> It is imperative for all Americans and all New Yorkers that we uplift the people and communities with the highest rates of incarceration.

## **Access to higher education is a means to break the cycle of incarceration.**

Postsecondary education is the best means to move into the middle class. Without it, 47% remain in the circumstances to which they were born while 90% who obtain college degrees achieve upward mobility.<sup>7</sup> With this comes higher rates of pay, better employment, and reduced reliance on government assistance.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, there are college-in-prison programs that are maintained through several funding streams, but they are inequitably distributed across the state. Restoring TAP funding for incarcerated people, creates this opportunity where it presently does not exist.

There is also an undeniable multi-generational effect. The children of incarcerated parents suffer. However, studies demonstrate that when an incarcerated parent obtains education behind bars it increases the aspirational outcomes of their children and the likelihood that they will seek a college degree.<sup>9</sup> This creates a new multi-generational

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es\\_20180314\\_looneyincarceration\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es_20180314_looneyincarceration_final.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58eb0522e6f2e1dfce591dee/t/596e1246d482e9c1c6b86699/1500385865855/seven-neighborhood+revisited+rpt.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/The\\_Consequences\\_of\\_Dropping\\_Out\\_of\\_High\\_School.pdf](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/economic\\_mobility/pursuing\\_american\\_dream.pdf.pdf](https://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/economic_mobility/pursuing_american_dream.pdf.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/education-pays-2019-full-report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/changing\\_minds.pdf](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/changing_minds.pdf)

effect reverberating a cascade of benefits throughout our most vulnerable communities. Armed with education, individuals who have touched the criminal justice system earn social capital and insight to raise up their communities - breaking the chains to imprisonment.

**Restoring TAP is smart fiscal policy.**

Economists on both sides of the aisle have described the enormous amount taxpayers spend on imprisonment.<sup>10</sup> This money could otherwise be diverted to mechanisms that reduce crime with much higher rates of return on investment.<sup>11</sup>

The FY 2020 Executive Budget proposed an increase of roughly \$154 million in higher education spending. This does not include fiscal implications of other named policy proposals. For less than 10% of this and less than 2% of the total TAP budget we could provide access to higher education to those behind bars.<sup>12</sup> Because TAP operates as an entitlement program, this would not take away any money from non-incarcerated students.

Projected cost-savings - based solely on the reduced rates of recidivism that empirical research ties to the provision of post-secondary education - exceed the cost of expansion of TAP to incarcerated populations.<sup>13</sup> It more than pays for itself.

**This is ultimately an issue of educational equity.**

We can all recognize that access to education is transformative. While 45% of the general population has a college degree, this is true for less than 5% of those incarcerated.<sup>14</sup> When the decision was made to remove access to education inside, it removed educational opportunity for our most vulnerable.

Because I was able to earn my bachelor's degree in prison, I returned to my community not only personally transformed by the education I received but also empowered and better equipped to promulgate sustainable change. In our state motto, "Excelsior," we commit ourselves to the idea that we are forever moving upward. If that remains true, then the same educational opportunities guaranteed for some must be provided to all.

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<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/top-economists-white-house-explain-how-mass-incarceration-hurts-economy>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Modeling based on publicly available SUNY data and other states calculates a fiscal of \$15 million if the TAP budget remains around 1.1 billion. This is provided by College and Community Fellowship.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>