

Congress Passes Law Allowing Incarcerated Students Access to Pell Grant

In a redemptive story of hope, incarcerated students hoping to better themselves behind bars are given a second chance. The U.S Congress recently passed legislation allowing those incarcerated to apply for access to Pell Grants, as part of the 2021 fiscal year omnibus package.

Vera Institute of Justice posted a celebratory tweet:

It's official: Congress has voted to repeal the federal ban on Pell Grant access for people in prison!

*This historic victory will make postsecondary education more accessible to incarcerated students all across the country.
#RestorePell*

– Vera Institute of Justice (@verainstitute) December 22, 2020

This option has not been available to prisoners since passage of the 1994 Crime Bill.

In a news release celebrating this win, Prison Fellowship, the nation's largest Christian nonprofit serving prisoners, former prisoners and their families, highlights the significant benefit of higher education in prison. It is a proven tool for improving public safety, workforce development and reducing racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Through the restoration of the Pell Grant, federal funding will allow these benefits to bloom.

"Access to Pell Grants has been denied to aspiring incarcerated students for a quarter century," said Heather

Rice-Minus, senior vice president of advocacy and church mobilization for Prison Fellowship. "Today's inclusion of this reform opens a new window of hope that will pay back dividends in the form of safer communities inside and outside corrections facilities for decades to come."

Since its passing in 2015, the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative has helped 16,000 students obtain Pell Grants. With Pell reinstated, this number could grow to more than 450,000.

Americans proudly expressed their support of this action in a poll taken during the 2020 election. Vera Institute of Justice reported that the poll surveyed 15,200 people in 12 states, intentionally oversampling people of color. Support for the reinstatement was high among 81% of Black voters, 75% of Latinx voters and 67% of white voters.

Additionally, in April of this year, the Trump administration authorized the expansion of the school program, allowing for 130 schools in 42 states to take part in this project. Previously there were only 63 schools located in 26 states participating.

While "there is still work to be done, this proposal will help millions of students," Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., told . {eoa}