

February 7, 2022

**Written Testimony in Support of Restoring TAP Funding to Incarcerated Individuals
Submitted to the February 7, 2022 Higher Education Committee Hearing**

Dear Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Eric Curatolo and I am a recently returned citizen. During my two decades of incarceration I saw a lot of bad sprinkled with some good. The Bard Prison Initiative and programs like it was some of that good that existed. I saw firsthand the growth that college programs afforded my peers. I eventually participated in college through BPI, myself, receiving my Associates degree from Bard College. There is no way to downplay the role that receiving this educational opportunity played in changing my life and the lives of many others. Through the educational process of pursuing my degree I was not only being prepared for gainful employment but also being prepared to live a productive, civically engaged life. This is why I write to you in support of restoring TAP eligibility to the incarcerated—it is simply a smart policy.

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 Ron Kim of the 40th Assembly District, and Senator Toby Ann Stavisky of NY Senate District 16.

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 education over prisons and punishment.

Thank you,

Eric Curatolo,
BPI Alumnus ‘18