



1212 New York Ave. N.W.  
Suite 900  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
202-525-5717

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Testimony from:

Jesse Kelley, Manager of Government Affairs and Criminal Justice & Civil Liberties, R Street Institute

Testimony on HB 463, “An act to provide access to education and job readiness skills for individuals incarcerated in state prisons and local jails.”

June 24, 2019

House Committee on Rules, Calendar, and Operations of the House

Chairman Lewis and members of the Committee,

My name is Jesse Kelley, and I am manager of government affairs and criminal justice & civil liberties for the R Street Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research organization. Our mission is to engage in policy research and outreach to promote free markets and limited, effective government in many areas, including access to postsecondary correctional education. HB 463 is of special interest to us in this regard.

The pursuit of higher education is perhaps the most worthwhile use of time for incarcerated people. Educational programming within prisons and jails can change the way individuals serve their period of incarceration and help them become employable, stable members of society upon release.

Indeed, one study found that an incarcerated person’s education level is highly correlated with his or her chances of recidivism: The recidivism rate for incarcerated individuals with postsecondary education credits was 44 percent lower than that of those without credits.<sup>1</sup> But many incarcerated people still do not have the opportunity to seek out higher education while serving a criminal sentence.

For the last several decades, the state of North Carolina has worked to support postsecondary education in its prisons. By improving funding mechanisms for incarcerated students in state prisons and expanding access to those detained in jails, North Carolina can provide more access to correctional programming and likely curtail recidivism.

Attempts to increase spending on correctional education have been met with opposition, specifically from those who question whether incarcerated individuals should receive benefits. But the benefits of these programs extend beyond the lives of their participants. Evidence shows that education programs within prisons are a cost-effective way to improve public safety. For example, one cost-benefit analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Steurer et al., “The Top-Nine Reasons to Increase Correctional Education Programs,” *Corrections Today*, 2010. <http://www.rifuture.org/wp-content/uploads/top-nine-reasons-to-increase-corr-ed-programs.pdf>.

found that correctional education is nearly “twice as cost-effective as incarceration” and calculated that correctional education cost the state about \$1,600 per crime prevented, while extending prison sentences cost around \$2,800 per crime prevented.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, incarcerated students in jails and prisons are ineligible to receive state scholarship funds from the North Carolina Education Lottery Scholarship, the North Carolina Need-Based Scholarship for Independent Colleges and the North Carolina Community College Grant Program. This is because North Carolina ties these grant opportunities to the same criteria established for Pell Grant qualification, and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 made incarcerated individuals ineligible for Pell Grants.

Even if the federal government has not yet addressed this educational funding disparity, the state should remove the link to Pell Grants and amend their own scholarships’ qualifications to include incarcerated individuals who want to improve their lives.

Postsecondary correctional education creates more post-release opportunities and decreases the likelihood of recidivism, improving public safety and supporting communities across North Carolina. Accordingly, the state’s residents and policymakers alike should support and work to expand existing programs. The most logical way to do this is to make incarcerated students eligible for the largest state-funded grants and to increase educational programming within local county jails.

For these reasons, North Carolina should give HB 463 serious consideration.

Very respectfully,

Jesse Kelley  
Manager, Government Affairs and Criminal Justice & Civil Liberties  
R Street Institute  
jkelley@rstreet.org

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<sup>2</sup> Audrey Bazos and Jessica Hausman, “Correctional Education as a Crime Control Program,” University of California at Los Angeles School of Public Policy and Social Research, March 2004, p. 10.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/nvya4pyz18mz4w5/CorrEdVsMorePrisons.pdf>