Testimony of
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Resolution in support of President Barack Obama's Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, which will initiate new models to allow incarcerated individuals to receive Pell Grants to finance their education

Oversight: Higher Education Access for Incarcerated and Recently Incarcerated Individuals

September 22, 2105

We would like to thank the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of President Barack Obama’s Second Chance Pell Pilot Program and the possibilities it promises to increase access to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Every significant study shows that education dramatically reduces recidivism. Those who leave prison with a college degree are much more likely to gain employment and contribute to the support of their families, as well as to become role models for their children (and more than 50% of incarcerated people have children). Indeed, many who begin higher education in prison are inspired to continue their education on the outside, often completing unfinished undergraduate degrees or pursuing masters and doctorates. Tertiary education also dramatically increases the safety of prisons for all
those inside. And, perhaps most importantly, it fosters the potential among those who have been incarcerated to become leaders in bringing about positive change on behalf of their communities.

The Center for Justice and the Heyman Center for the Humanities recently received a three-year, $1M grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in support of the Justice-in-Education Initiative: a joint effort of these Columbia University centers to provide education to the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated. Since spring 2015, when the award was announced, we have begun to send Columbia faculty to teach in local prisons. By the end of the 2015-16 academic year, we anticipate that approximately twenty Columbia-affiliated faculty and graduate students will have taught college-accredited classes in behavioral sciences, language study, psychology, drama, humanities, and anthropology at Taconic and Sing Sing Correctional Facilities. By the end of the three-year grant period, we expect that number to rise to more than fifty. We have also created a gateway humanities course, modeled on Columbia’s famed Core Curriculum, which this past summer was completed by a select group of formerly incarcerated individuals, named Justice-in-Education Scholars. This course is part of the standard undergraduate curriculum and will be offered to both Columbia undergraduates and a new cohort of Justice-in-Education Scholars in Spring 2016 (and at least once annually in future years). The half dozen Justice-in-Education Scholars who took the course this past summer are now all either enrolled in four-colleges or are applying to do so (with the support of the Double Discovery Program at Columbia University). Two of these scholars are now working for the Justice-in-Education Initiative and studying at Columbia. (Some of our efforts were recently covered in The Record, the official Columbia University publication, and can be found here: http://news.columbia.edu/justiceed.)

Our goal in developing the Justice-in-Education Initiative is not only to make higher education available to a group that has been effectively excluded from it, but also to develop Columbia collaborations with community organizations and other universities in our efforts to do so. Many New Yorkers who have returned from prison are playing leadership roles in supporting the successful reentry of others. We consider the participation of these partners as vital to our work, visiting Columbia classes, providing input on curriculum development, guest lecturing, and actively contributing to scholarship.

We also consider it the obligation of the University to address the issue of mass incarceration. By considering the multiple social, political, and ethical issues that mass incarceration raises from different perspectives and approaches, we seek to prepare
Columbia students to foster a more equitable, less racially-based system of legal justice in their future careers as lawyers, educators, policy makers, researchers, and as citizens. In adopting an apprenticeship model whereby doctoral students assist seasoned teachers in the prison classroom, graduate students are given the opportunity to explore teaching in prison as a possible career path. Beginning in Spring 2016, we intend to provide opportunities to Columbia students to take classes inside prisons along with students who are incarcerated—as we know that such mixed population courses can be transformative for students from both institutions.

The groundswell of support for the Justice-in-Education Initiative has been extraordinary and inspiring. Enthusiasm is virtually palpable among Columbia faculty, students, and administrators—from the arts and humanities to the social and health sciences to social work and law. We believe that such passion reflects a growing awareness of the centrality of “justice issues” across the disciplines. Reimagining justice is the kind of grand societal challenge identified in the *Heart of the Matter*, the much-cited report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences—a challenge to which the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts are uniquely equipped to contribute. We also believe that the collaborative partnership we have formed—two University centers working in tandem with others that have led the call for change in the justice system (e.g., Hudson Link, the Prison-to-College Pipeline, the Vera Institute, the Correctional Association, the Clemente Course administered by Bard College)—responds to the urging of that report to take knowledge-generation out of “academic self-enclosure and connect . . . it to the world” (43). Universities have had very few mechanisms for connecting community and university-based initiatives to achieve justice goals. The Justice-in-Education Initiative offers one model for building partnerships with community members and organizations to extend education to the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated.

The financial support provided by the restitution of Pell Grants for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals would dramatically increase the ability of our Initiative and others like them at other institutions of higher education to educate this underserved population. While private funding has made our programs possible, such programs have necessarily reached only a limited number of individuals who would benefit greatly by them. Many of us (at CUNY, Cornell, Vassar, and elsewhere) are exploring ways to coordinate our efforts to educate incarcerated individuals. Pell Grants would make our collective degree-granting in New York prisons significantly easier.
We want to thank you all for your time as well as your attention to this critically important matter. We look forward to working together as the Council continues to engage the issues of educating incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.