



# Thinking Back & Looking Forward

Hudson Link Sits Down with  
Leaders to Discuss  
Pell Funding for  
Incarcerated Students



## Part 1

Former New York State  
Correctional Leaders —

Brian Fischer & Elaine Lord

# In the eighties and early nineties, many prisons and jails across the United States offered people incarcerated in their institutions the opportunity to pursue higher education through partnership with local colleges and universities.

The most common funding mechanism for these programs was federal Pell grants, which higher education institutions would help students apply for and then use to cover the costs of instruction, tuition, books, and supplies.

The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, passed under the Clinton Administration, placed a ban on incarcerated individuals' eligibility to receive Pell grants, effectively decimating college programs in prisons across the country: the United States went from having 350 prison college programs to just eight nationwide.<sup>1</sup>

To combat this profound loss, a broad coalition of students, alumni, educators, community members, and correctional leaders have spent the last 25 years working with private and religious funders to rebuild opportunities for college education inside prisons and jails all over the United States. In the process, they developed high-quality practices, reduced recidivism rates, and

increased post-release employment opportunities for students.

In 2015 the federal government to reinstated a limited number of Pell Grants through the "Second Chance Pell" experiment. Following the success of the "Second Chance Pell Experiment" legislation passed in December 2020 plans to end the 26-year ban on the eligibility of incarcerated Americans to receive federal Pell Grants to fund their college education by 2023.

This historic shift will lead to a dramatic change in access and opportunities for incarcerated individuals across the country. To look forward and adequately plan for this opportunity, it is essential to capture and share the stories of leaders who successfully kept prison college programs

<sup>1</sup> Fine, M. et al. "Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum-Security Prison. Effects on Women in Prison, the Prison Environment, Recarceration Rates and Post-Release Outcomes." (2001).

moving forward for over a quarter of a century despite the divestment of federal and state funds.

In anticipation of Pell's reinstatement, Hudson Link sat down with Elaine Lord, the former superintendent of Bedford Hills, and Brian Fischer, the former superintendent of Sing Sing (and later former NYS DOCCS Commissioner). These two correctional leaders worked in partnership with incarcerated individuals in their facilities and local colleges to bring college programs back after the elimination of Pell and New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP).

The following interview was conducted by Hudson Link's Executive Director, Sean Pica. During his incarceration, Sean witnessed Pell's elimination and was in the first graduating class of Hudson Link, a privately funded grassroots organization that formed in the cell blocks of Sing Sing in 1998 to restore college education in prison through a broad coalition of partners.

After coming home, Sean volunteered for Hudson Link and later assumed the role of Executive Director. Under his leadership the organization grew to provide degree-granting college education in six New York state correctional facilities, serving up to 600 students annually and offering re-entry support to over 1400 alumni upon release.

**We hope this series of conversations, "Thinking Back and Looking Forward" serves as a reminder of public funding vulnerability and highlights the importance of shared investment and leadership from currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, colleges, community members, and corrections to sustain program success.**

(From Left to Right:  
Brian Fischer, Sean Pica,  
and Elaine Lord in  
February 2020)



**Sean Pica (SP):** You both were Superintendents at facilities when Pell and TAP were taken away in 1994. I know the perspective of being incarcerated in one of those facilities at the time. But from your perspective, what was the impact of the elimination of public funding on the prison population?

**Elaine Lord (EL):** When college went away, the community mourned the loss of college. I had a couple of women come up to me and say “I didn’t finish. I have three credits left and I didn’t get my degree.” And they didn’t have the chance to finish that.

It didn’t take long for the women to come together to talk about how to get it back. There was always a strong sense of community at Bedford. I think what makes Bedford different, and maybe why college started back there is they do have a concentration of long termers. In fact, at that time, to leave Bedford, you had to have six years or less left on your sentence.

**Brian Fischer (BF):** For a long time [the men] were angry and depressed. The sense of community at men’s facilities is different because the men are always being moved around, so you didn’t have a community like you probably had at Bedford or Taconic.

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**SP:** I was in nine different max prisons over my time and went to college in almost every one of them. I would wake up a new place and sign up for college. When I was at Sing Sing, the college one day came in and packed up.

**BF:** Yep and I think when they lost Pell, the men realized they didn't have anything - they had a bunch of credits, they didn't have a degree, and it was spread out from four different colleges. And they realized "Okay, what do I do with all this stuff?" And when these guys were released and went into the community, the community said, "That's nice, you've got 50 credits. Everybody has got 50 credits." And that's when we all realized that without a degree associated with the college program, it's not meaningless, but it's less effective.

When Pell comes back, we need to make sure that it's related to a degree completion. Otherwise, it's just lots of nice courses.



*When the superintendent gets involved, it works. If the commitment of leaders doesn't exist, we're just back to throwing classes at people.*

**SP:** Both of you were instrumental in supporting the efforts of incarcerated individuals to bring back college. Elaine with the women of Bedford and Brian with us men at Sing Sing. Brian, I had never met a superintendent like you before. I remember we'd be meeting and there you saying "Hey, can I join these conversations?" Was supporting college in prison controversial at the time? Why was this important to you?

**EL:** One of the reasons college came back to Bedford was because we were really lucky to have nearly 400 volunteers. One of them—Thea Jackson—was a black woman who came from a family of educators historically, way back to reconstruction days. She was a volunteer in the Children's Center. So, Thea was sitting in the Children's Center one day and she and the women were talking about what programs that should be there and the women brought up college. So she sat down in my office and said "Would you have any objection to me trying to

pursue something?" and I said no. And one of her friends was Regina Peruggi, then president of Marymount Manhattan College, and she contacted Regina. Regina was president of the women's college presidents' association. Regina said, "I'll get six or seven of the college presidents involved." So, we went from having no college presidents to our first meeting to having a meeting with 7 college presidents, all female. We held the meetings inside the prison so the women could attend. They were running the meetings. And you know, we had support from the town of Bedford. I can remember the town supervisor delivering file cabinets that they weren't using in the town.

**SP:** I feel like we were lucky at Sing Sing because at Bedford it had already been created. Our first advisor came to work with us after her release. She taught us it was all about women supporting women, students supporting students. If the men had just created it without the women, it probably would not have had the community element.

Brian, I remember you said to us, "I don't know how to start a college program, if this thing launches, who sits in the program?" And we said what we thought you wanted to hear: "The guy whose got his foot out the door, the one with 18 months left." And you said, "I'm not telling you how to run this, but if it was up to me it would be anyone eligible."

**BF:** When the superintendent gets involved, it works. If the commitment of leaders doesn't exist, we're just back to throwing classes at people.

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**SP:** At this time in 1997 and 1998, was this supported by your fellow colleagues in the Department of Corrections?

**BF:** Not at first. I can remember the attitude from the commissioner then was, “It’s your problem, if it works, great.”

**EL:** What he told me was “I don’t want to hear about it. I don’t want anything to do with it.”

**BF:** Once it started to go better, he was much more supportive. And it certainly helps when the commissioners are supportive. If a new superintendent doesn’t have support from Central Office, he’s going to be reluctant to let the [men or women] get together and do this thing. It’s survival. We have less violence in the prisons that have college, and when there is violence, it’s not the college guys or ladies who are in trouble.

**EL:** It’s about leadership. And the leadership starts at the top and dribbles down. If your leaders don’t want anything to do with it, then there is no reason for anyone else who works there to see it in any other way.



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**SP: When you think about Pell coming back what are your concerns or words of advice for new programs?**

**BF:** When Pell comes back and there's money going to the college, the question becomes how is the money distributed to the program? It's easy to say we've got a million dollars. This will go to the professors, the administration, the overhead, but out of a million dollars, how much actually gets to the students? There has to be a fiscal responsibility to the program as well as to the college. Like putting in a computer lab, a library, a tutoring program, upgrading the library, etc.

**EL:** At Bedford we had a good library funded by Marymount.

**SP:** And a learning center like no one else has in the country.

**EL:** The learning center was critical. The college did invest. Support from a college president matters.

*...out of a million dollars, how much actually gets to the students?*





**SP:** If the college president is not interested - if they don't understand the value and the emotional aspect of a prison-based college program, it's not going to work. Hudson Link works because it's a relationship kind of program. We know each other, we trust each other, the president comes in and sees what's going on.

**BF:** These programs are community programs. When Pell throws money across the state and more colleges are involved, you're not going to have the same kind of personal involvement on the part of the college and students. That's one of my fears - it becomes more impersonal than personal.

At graduation, when the chancellor comes in or the president comes in, they talk to the guys and the ladies as colleagues now. It's not us talking, it's an educator who is saying, "You've accomplished something." It's kind of verification outside of the prison system. They're saying, "You've done something, you've accomplished something, and now we expect you to go forward". Praise goes along away - especially when it comes from people you don't expect it from. It should be expected that corrections is going to work



towards education, but it's nice that what we do is understood and supported by people beyond corrections. Not just the public, but the critical element is the educational system is supportive of it.

**What role can formerly incarcerated leaders play in criminal justice reform, advocacy, and prison education?**

**BF:** If it wasn't for [incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals] there would be no criminal justice reform. Like it or not, it's their articulation of the issues that have made the people stop and listen. And get other people at least interested in what's going on.

**SP:** I can't thank you both enough for your support and for taking the time to share your thoughts. We literally would not be here without you today and I really think you have so many valuable pieces of information to share with the broader community.