March 14, 2019
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator,

On behalf of the Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology, I urge you to support restoring Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals. With Congress currently considering reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, this is an opportune time to make this change. Many of our Jesuit colleges and universities offer educational opportunities in prisons. As a result, we are acutely aware of the transformative power of higher education for this forgotten segment of society. Unfortunately, such education remains inaccessible to many.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops in their document Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice remind us that incarceration “should be about more than punishment. Since nearly all inmates will return to society, prisons must be places where offenders are challenged, encouraged, and rewarded for efforts to change their behaviors and attitudes, and where they learn the skills needed for employment and life in community.”

In 1994, Congress barred incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell Grants, thus severely limiting their ability to access post-secondary education while in prison. Prior to this ban, Pell Grants served as an important supplement to state funding for educational programs. As a result, the number of post-secondary degree programs in prisons fell from over 350 in 1990 to just 12 in 2005.

A recent study by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Georgetown University Center on Poverty and Inequality found that “lifting the ban on Pell Grants for people in prison would increase state employment rates of formerly incarcerated workers who participate in a post-secondary program by ... nearly 10 percent.” The study goes on to note that lifting the ban would reduce likely recidivism rates, saving an estimated $365.8 million per year in government budgets.

In sum, reinstating Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals will not only better respect the inherent dignity of those incarcerated by providing important educational opportunities, but will also reduce recidivism, reduce unemployment, and save taxpayer money.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Ted Penton, SJ
Secretary