

Keeping Welfare Recipients Out of College

by Lynne Weikart

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As recently as seven years ago, a college education provided one of the fastest and surest routes out of poverty. Welfare recipients, such as the thousands who attended City University of New York and worked long and hard to graduate from college, were virtually assured of getting off welfare. But no more. Not in this country. Not at this time. Not in the current "era of meanness." And, with Congress set to consider welfare regulation this year, the situation could get far worse before it gets better. In its 1996 so-called reforms, the federal government removed welfare as a safety net and required most welfare recipients to go to work. The [Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996](#) permitted those on welfare to enroll for a maximum of one year of vocational education. States were given flexibility though on how to interpret and enforce this regulation, and some allowed welfare recipients to attend higher education by defining college as a work-related activity. In 1999, Washington gave the states more leeway to permit people to attend college while receiving welfare benefits.

For the most part, New York City has not taken advantage of such flexibility. The administration of former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani gave welfare recipients work assignments away from their schools and homes, making it difficult for them to continue their education. Three years ago, the Welfare Rights Initiative at Hunter College convinced state legislators that this policy was punitive, and the legislators agreed to allow college students on welfare to enroll in work study on campus to fulfill their work requirement.

The results of that change are not yet known. But before the 1996 welfare reform law, a peak of 28,000 welfare recipients attended CUNY. After the 1996 law with its stringent work requirements, only 5,000 attended.

At a conference this fall held by Metropolitan College of New York, Medgar Evers College, the National Urban League, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators and the College Board, several people spoke eloquently about why we should care whether welfare recipients can attend college. A former CUNY student who had to leave college after three years because welfare required her to work wanted to know why our city, state and federal government could not do better.

College educated people earn more money than those who have not gone to college. "Half of women in the U.S. with a high school education who work earn less than \$15,000 a year, but half of college-educated women earn at least \$31,000 a year," said Bill Spriggs of the National Urban League who spoke at the conference.

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Women cannot work their way out of poverty, but they can educate themselves out of poverty. By denying people the chance to attend college, said Spriggs, "We are ignoring a whole group of women who are capable of college education, the best way out of welfare."

In a study conducted with the New York City Human Resources Administration, Aurora Jackson of the University of Pittsburgh found that welfare recipients who continue their education after high school are more likely to be employed, tend to be less depressed and have better parenting skills and children with fewer behavioral problems than welfare recipients with a high school diploma or less.

Edmund Gordon, a retired Yale psychology professor who has spent a lifetime documenting racism in education observed that too many people lack a sense of membership in our society, too many people are excluded. Our society, he said, must be in "the human development business." One way to accomplish that would be enabling more people to attend college.

Maine has made progress on this front. It has two programs for welfare recipients: a work program and an education one. According to Judy Williams of the Maine Bureau of Family Independence, the education program allows students to attend college for two years for an associate's degree or four years for a bachelor's degree. The students are eligible for financial aid, childcare and transportation. They work 10 to 15 hours a week in internships and training programs. These welfare recipients have a 95 percent graduation rate and a less than 6 percent likelihood of returning to welfare.

In New York, the Welfare to Careers Project operated by Medgar Evers, Pace University and Metropolitan College of New York provides a free education, career counseling, childcare and job readiness skills to former welfare recipients and helps them find work. Almost two thirds of those who start the program complete it. We need to follow the lesson of our own history. After World War II, when it became obvious that an entire generation had missed higher education and the country needed an educated workforce, the government paid every veteran to attend four years of college through the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill also provided housing and health benefits. It was an entitlement program without stigma.

What is our federal government doing now? Last year, after the technological revolution made it clear that the country needed an highly educated workforce, both houses of Congress passed

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bills to make it even more difficult for anyone on welfare to obtain a higher education degree while collecting welfare. These bills, which sought to restrict access to higher education and to extend work requirements to at least 30 hours a week from the current 20, did not pass before Congress adjourned. But now the new, even more conservative Congress could enact these and even more draconian rules when it takes up the revisions to 1996 welfare act.

Things in New York are a bit more promising. Thanks to our new mayor, the city is being less punitive in its attitude toward welfare recipients. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has indicated that work alone is inadequate to take people out of poverty and that he wants education as part of the package for welfare recipients.

So far, Bloomberg has not backed this up with any specific policy initiative. The General Welfare Committee led by Councilmember Bill deBlasio has passed legislation that allows welfare recipients who qualify to attend college as part of their work requirement. The full council will consider the bill soon. But regardless of what New York City and New York State do, the new conservative Congress can make attending college even more difficult. We have not seen the end of the "era of meanness."

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