Change costs inmates’ education

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — The federal government gutted the Louisiana State Penitentiary’s post-secondary education program last week, booting 61 of 108 inmates from paralegal and computer classes.

“This is a dark day for Angola,” said inmate Douglas “Swede” Dennis. “The inescapable message is that we’re being written off.”

All 61 former students are serving life sentences without parole. Some of them were halfway through the one-year programs.

“It was the brightest thing we had going for us,” said Norris Henderson, last year’s class valedictorian.

Led by Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and other conservative lawmakers, the U.S. Congress last year amended the Higher Education Act of 1965 to deny educational grants to prison inmates facing death sentences or serving life sentences without parole eligibility.

The $2,300 stipends, known as “Pell Grants,” enabled

the lifers to enroll in Northwest Missouri Community College’s courses at Angola.

Warden John P. Whitley, who helped initiate the Northwest Missouri Community College courses, shared the former students’ disappointment.

“It makes it hard on a prison that deals with lifers when, every time you turn around, a lifer’s losing something,” Whitley said.

Inmate Kenneth Vincent, now in his 13th year at Angola, said he has worked hard to better himself.

“I would like to show society I’m not in the same frame of mind as when I came in,” Vincent said. “I worked myself from the ground up. The doors (to freedom) are not closed. This really hurts.”

Had Helms and U.S. Reps. Thomas Coleman and Bart Gordon prevailed, no one in a state or federal prison would have been eligible for Pell Grants.

A conference committee, however, limited the ban to death row inmates and lifers without parole eligibility.

Gordon apparently hasn’t given up, because he reintroduced his original amendment this year, Dennis said.

The irony of federal lawmakers trying to mesh education policy with the 50 states’ sentencing laws is that an Angola inmate serving 90 years without parole — “practical life” — is eligible for a Pell Grant, Assistant Warden Dwayne McFatter said.

His release date may be in 2085, but he’s got a release date.

According to an article Dennis wrote for the prison news magazine, Helms argued that American taxpayers

should not have to pay college tuition for convicts while many law-abiding taxpayers are struggling to send their children to college.

“My family works and pays taxes,” said inmate Michael Vanchiere. “I worked and paid taxes when I was out there. We need this, and I don’t think anyone is more eligible than me.”

Earl Truvia said he understands public sentiment toward prisoners, but he would remind the public that education is a way “to correct the mistakes we’ve made.”

Dennis said Helms and other conservative lawmakers have shaped public perception to make it appear that convicts are receiving benefits denied other students.

The Northwest Missouri Community College courses, while labeled college level, are “more attuned to v-tech than any other thing — non-manual trades,” Dennis said.

“We’re not a bunch of happy lifers going to English Lit class,” he said.

Although Angola inmates cannot earn a degree through the Northwest Missouri Community College program, graduates value the certificates they earn in paralegal studies, computer

programming and computer technology, many inmates said.

“I believe society as a whole would benefit by allowing inmates to get an education,” said inmate Calvin Duncan. “There have been inmates who left this place who are employed as paralegals.”

“If you’re leaving with something, you’re not as enthused about going out there and committing a crime,” he said.

“I want it to be understood how important education is, even to prisoners,” added Keith Alexander, a paralegal graduate who joined other Angola inmates in filing a pending legal challenge to the 1992 amendment.

Although the lifers don’t have parole eligibility, they still harbor hope that one day they may win their freedom, Alexander and others said.

“There are many avenues to go home, but there’s not much in prison to make you ready to go home,” Alexander said.

The limited opportunities that Northwest Missouri Community College offered is “far better than going back to society with just a GED,” Alexander said.

“We should all be eligible, so that when the day comes we’ll be able to return. And I believe that day will come,” lifer Edward Murphy said.

Inmates

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Angola inmates, from left, Kenneth Vincent, Darren Hooks and Keith Alexander discuss why the college classes offered at Angola are important to prisoners.