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## Oiling the Revolving Door

The American corrections system will release more than 600,000 prisoners this year — and half will commit new crimes and be back in prison three years from now. There is at least one proven way to break the cycle. Researchers have discovered and rediscovered that inmates who earn college degrees tend to stay out of jail. But former offenders have found it increasingly hard to educate themselves and gear up for productive lives since Congress began to cut them off from federal education aid in the 1990's.

Congress may be ready to consider at least a half-step back from that mistake. Lawmakers may not be prepared to revisit the federal ban that made convicted felons ineligible for Pell grants, the federal tuition aid aimed primarily at poor and middle-income students. But the House of Representatives is at least talking about changing the 1998 law under which more than 140,000 students have been turned down for federal student loans because of drug offenses, some of which are minor and a decade old.

The law was not supposed to work this way. According to Representative Mark Souder, the Indiana Republican who wrote the measure, it was aimed only at students who committed drug crimes while receiving federal loans. But the law has instead been applied to every applicant with a drug conviction, even if the conviction was so minor as to carry no jail time, and even if it occurred long before the student ever envisioned going to college. Mr. Souder has put forth a revised version of the law that would return to his original intent.

That would be an improvement, but student aid should still not be turned into a law enforcement weapon, particularly for those convicted of minor offenses that a court would appropriately dismiss with a fine or probation. Congress should repeal this law instead of just tinkering with it. Beyond that, the country needs to back away from all policies that prevent ex-convicts from attending college, because college is the one sure way to get them back into the mainstream and keep them out of jail.