Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission Meeting Minutes

April 3, 2025
9am-10:30am

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Jamel Freeman, Ainsley Moench, Alyssa Fieo, Amanda Owens, Andrea Cantora, Anne Bocchini Pack, Arinze Ifekauche, Christian Gant, Diana Bailey, Gordon Pack, Hon. Marc DeSimone, Jocelyn Nolasco, John Feaster III, John Griffin, Judith Lichtenberg, Kaitlin Quigley, Karen Esterque, Kavya Vandavasi, Lindsey McCullough, Meredith Conde, Ramieka Robinson-Peoples, Sanjay Rai, Stephen Steurer

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I. Agenda Item

The meeting was called to order at 9:04 am. Dr. Stephen Steurer asked everyone to introduce themselves.

The March 6, 2025 meeting minutes were approved.

Ainsley Moench discussed the correctional institution visits coming up. The Commission is invited to three days of visits, visiting MCI-W, JCI, MCTC, RCI, and ECI in April and May. She asked Commission members who wanted to attend to send their information to her and Robin Williams at DPSCS.

Dr. Stephen Steurer gave an update on HB 877, which would extend the life of the Commission until 2029. While waiting to see if the bill passes, the Commission will operate on the original schedule of having an interim report out in June and a final report out in January.

Dr. Andrea Cantora gave updates on the Higher Education workgroup. The workgroup is looking at issues surrounding space, funding, technology, and incentives. As for funding, the workgroup is looking at specifically allowing incarcerated students to access state financial aid, as well as creating a tuition waiver for incarcerated students, similar to the one that exists for youth in the foster care system or who have experienced homelessness. Asking for state funding may be difficult, as the state is cutting funding due to budget cuts. However, funding is important as Pell Grants do not cover the full cost of tuition and program operation. Bowie State is hosting an Inaugural HBCU Summit on Higher Education in Prison during the weekend, and the National Alliance for Higher Education in Prison is hosting their annual conference next week. Commissioners are encouraged to attend and bring the knowledge back to the workgroup.

Dr. Stephen Steurer added that Pell Grants were first extended to incarcerated individuals during the first Trump administration, and he hopes that they will remain available.

Diana Bailey gave an update on the Career Technology and Workforce Development workgroup. The group has been seeing staffing shortages, which impact the number of people who are eligible to enroll in classes. Involvement in correctional education does result in higher wages and higher rates of employment after release, but all returning citizens struggle to find employment. The workgroup suspects it is due to the employer's attitudes against returning citizens. Additionally, it is important to have career counseling before release. MCE is unable to get any post-release employment information due to the information being held with probation and parole data. She suggested that the workgroup recommend that employment information stored with probation and parole be shared with MCE and correctional education. Best practices for landing a job post-release include access to workforce and employer connections. John Griffin added that staff shortages make it difficult to give transitional help. Diana Bailey asked if the Commission had followed up with the Division of Parole and Probation for employment outcome information, and Dr. Stephen Steurer said they were working on that. The Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center is working with the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services and the Department of Labor to evaluate employment outcomes for returning citizens who had been in a correctional education program.

Diana Bailey brought up that in the past, the Maryland Department of Labor had designated career services in the regional one-stops. John Feaster III confirmed that those services are still being offered in the American Job Centers, and re-entry navigators are specifically designated to help formerly-incarcerated people. Everyone they provide services to should be registered in the Maryland Workforce Exchange. The number of people served could be requested by the Commission. lo data, however, may not be entirely accurate, as the Department of Labor relies on self-attestation of previous incarceration, which may come with stigma. Additionally, services provided on the outside are in a separate office in the Department of Labor than the one that operates correctional education. Dr. Stephen Steurer suggested that perhaps the Commission could get the data in other ways. The Commission should look into post-release employment data as a program evaluation measure.

Dr. Stephen Steurer discussed the data request to the Department of Labor, saying that program metrics such as attendance, number of closures and closure reasons, waiting lists, and enrollment are essential in program evaluation for future recommendations, especially as consistent education is crucial. Obtaining a GED is crucial for involvement in other programs, such as career technology or college programs.

Alyssa Fieo asked when the process manual for special education was going to be released, and whether or not the Maryland State Department of Education had done any special education compliance reviews. A review meeting will be held between March and May, and no violations have previously been reported. In the data received, 259 students were eligible for special education in the past two years, with a majority of them being classified as "Other Health Impairment," which often refers to students with ADHD. More special education students attempted and passed single GED tests than the entire GED test. The Correctional Education Association recommends that students with disabilities have the option to pursue either a regular high school track or the GED.

Ramieka Robinson-Peoples talked about possibly offering disability screenings and accommodations for incarcerated students, as well as time, space, and access to tutors to study for the GED after school is done. Dr. Stephen Steurer highlighted the Petey Green Foundation, which provides tutoring services to incarcerated students. In his experience, students who received tutoring performed better, and Maryland historically had more tutoring services.

Dr. Stephen Steurer emphasized the need to look closely at the data provided by the Department of Labor. John Feaster III replied that the data collection process is piecemeal, as there is no database, and data is collected in Microsoft Excel due to technology limitations. The Department of Labor is putting out a procurement to upgrade its database to collect more information in a centralized way and analyze the data.

Dr. Stephen Steurer made comments on the waitlist data, asking what the average time on a waitlist is. He also mentioned that the closure rates are concerning, as some institutions are closed 20-80% of the time. Schools could be closed for numerous reasons, such as correctional officer shortages or teaching staff leave. He expressed a desire to participate in Correctional Education Council meetings, which John Feaster III said were open to the public.

Dr. Stephen Steurer discussed library and reentry resources, asking what library programs exist and what the contents of the programs are, if computers are working, and if the space is used often. He also went over the current programs available at each institution, and then opened up the floor for questions and comments.

John Feaster III thanked the Commission for their patience in the Department of Labor for getting the data together.

Dr. Stephen Steurer emphasized the importance of having technology in education programs.

Gordon Pack asked if, during the visits to correctional facilities, the Commission was aware that incarcerated individuals may not want to speak candidly about their experiences due to the fear of

retaliation. John Feaster III replied that during the tours, incarcerated individuals are very transparent about their experiences, and the Department of Labor is committed to hearing constructive criticism. Dr. Stephen Steurer added that he hopes to be able to talk to everyone in the facilities without security nearby for fear of retaliation, and John Feaster III replied that that might not be feasible.

Alyssa Fieo highlighted John Griffin's comment that there should be an under 21 coordinator for education, and asked if there was any understanding of a student's high school credit count when entering incarceration.

Ramieka Robinson-Peoples discussed the importance of a positive atmosphere in education. Programs like horticulture or art boost the morale of students and positively affect incarcerated students' mental health. Dr. Stephen Steurer agreed that a positive atmosphere, in his experience, greatly impacts education.

Dr. Andrea Cantora commented on the correctional institution visits, saying that the timing may not allow the Commission to talk to students in any program. The college students will talk about anything honestly, even with a warden or officer in the room. Dr. Stephen Steurer said they may need to get the schedule of each institution before the visit to prepare.

Dr. Stephen Steurer talked about the interim report that will be produced in June, which will go over all of the issues identified in the Commission's discussions. He announced the next Commission meeting will be on May 8th.

Jocelyn Nolasco talked about prison libraries. Often, people assume incarcerated individuals only want law books; however, they enjoy all types of books. She offered to give the Commission some information from the American Library Association, of which she is a member. Dr. Stephen Steurer closed the meeting with a personal story about the impact books can have on an incarcerated individual.

The meeting adjourned at 10:40am.