Higher Education Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

4/3
1-2pm

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Ainsley Moench, Dr. Andrea Cantora, Christian Gant, Dr. Elyshia Aseltine, Emily Hainze, Gordon Pack, John Feaster III, John Griffin, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, Karen Esterque, Meredith Conde, Ramieka Robinson-Peoples, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Tanja Murphy

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I. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 1:02 pm.

II. Meeting Minutes Approval

The meeting minutes for February 27, 2025 were approved.

III. Discussion

A. Incentives

Dr. Andrea Cantora announced that the group would postpone talking about incentives until wait lists for programs decrease. Dr. Stephen Steurer and Gordon Pack agreed. Meredith Conde said that Goucher is looking to transition to a full-time program, so discussing student earnings and incentives will be important, but agreed that the group should put the issue aside for a future discussion. Dr. Stephen Steurer added that the group may want to look at recent legislative changes to diminution credits. Dr. Andrea Cantora agreed, saying that incentives for college program enrollment and degrees should give you more credits than a shorter-term program.

Karen Estereque emphasized the importance of sentence reduction when discussing incentives, adding that many college students both work and attend school. Additionally, being compensated for your time is crucial, as many incarcerated students have financial responsibilities.
Dr. Stephen Steurer suggested that the group put together all of the available incentives, and Dr. Andrea Cantora agreed and suggested that the work be pushed to next year.

B. Funding

Dr. Andrea Cantora spoke about incarcerated students not being allowed to access student aid and referenced a list of states that allow students to access aid. She continued that Danielle Cox is having meetings with the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) about scholarships not explicitly barring incarcerated students from access, and if language is needed to explicitly allow them access. This

may be an issue if it is interpreted that incarcerated students are taking away funds from non-incarcerated students. There was also the possibility of creating a tuition waiver for incarcerated students similar to those for foster care recipients and homeless populations. MHEC is leaning towards a tuition waiver program, and Dr. Andrea Cantora recommended that the Commission recommend this option as well.

Ainsley Moench asked how a tuition waiver would affect Pell Grant recipients. Dr. Andrea Cantora replied that Pell Grants may not last forever, and they do not cover the full cost of tuition. The tuition waiver would cover the gap in coverage between Pell Grant funding and costs like books and technology.

Dr. Stephen Steurer said that this would be a good recommendation for the Commission that may not need legislation for implementation.
Dr. Elyshia Aseltine added that the group should be wary about creating a binary between incarcerated students and traditional students, as incarcerated students may be considered as deserving of the same resources as traditional students. Dr. Andrea Cantora replied that the Commission should recommend that incarcerated students be able to access the same scholarships as any student, but that many incarcerated students will not be eligible for a majority of the scholarships. A tuition waiver would capture all incarcerated students in eligibility. Scholarship eligibility would not cost the state, and tuition waivers would only over the costs not covered by Pell Grants, which would vary by college.

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked if colleges could provide some examples of tuition costs.

Ainsley Moench mentioned that the report in June does not have to be extensive. For the final report, the group could look into some of the states that explicitly allow incarcerated students to access student aid, and examine the process they went through to pass that legislation. Dr. Stephen Steurer added that the report would be five to ten pages that detailed the topics the Commission is exploring. He will discuss with Del. Marlon Amprey about what the report should look like.

Christian Gant asked if the group would be going forward with the two recommendations. Dr. Andrea Cantora answered yes, but she would like more recommendations in the future. Currently, programs are struggling to start as they need staff, but there is not enough private external funding to support the staff. Christian Gant asked if the Commission would be supporting one recommendation over the other, and Dr. Stephen Steurer emphasized the importance of obtaining all funding available.

Dr. Andrea Cantora commented that part of the reason Wor-Wic Tech is ending their prison education program is that they did not have a full-time staff person dedicated to the program, and that was not sustainable. Meredith Conde added that originally Goucher College's program was run by faculty, but eventually had to hire a director. Christian Gant asked if one of the recommendations should be to fully fund a staff person to run programs, and Dr. Andrea Cantora and Dr. Stephen Steurer agreed.

Dr. Andrea Cantora said that the Commission should also talk about helping students once they leave prison. Christian Gant mentioned that there is a Task Force on the Creation of a Division of Returning Citizens & Expanded Reentry Services that the Commission should coordinate with. Ainsley Moench replied that they have been in contact with the Task Force Chair and have been sharing resources.

C. Space and Technology

Dr. Andrea Cantora said that site visits will be occurring soon to investigate the spaces available in institutions for programming. She wondered if outdoor space could be utilized.

Dr. Elyshia Aseltine offered that the funding recommendations should be worded to include the difference between what Pell Grants cover and tuition, rather than a certain amount, as tuition and Pell Grants could fluctuate over time. California utilizes workforce development funds to support higher education in prison, which might be explored.

John Feaster III asked if those funds are being used for re-entry programs. Dr. Elyshia Aseltine replied that yes, those funds are being used for re-entry centers on college campuses.

John Feaster III commented that security and movement are the biggest barriers to using space within prisons, so additional space may not be as important as developing remote learning options. Tanja Murphy added that education tablets are limited in where they can be accessed. John Feaster III suggested installing secure WiFi access so incarcerated students could use their laptops outside of the library.

Dr. Andrea Cantora said that at one point, the University of Baltimore tried having a dedicated housing unit for programming so students could keep their laptops and tablets in the housing unit with them. It worked well until the institution had to shift people around. A state policy could prevent shuffling students around in housing units dedicated to education.

Christian Gant brought up the Monica Cooper Act, which would create a pre-release center for women. He wondered if there were alternatives for space in underutilized state buildings.

Meredith Conde commented that technology should be used to enhance education, but should not replace the relational aspect of learning. Dr. Stephen Steurer agreed.

Christian Gant followed up on asking if classes could be held outside. John Griffin answered that it would come down to the institution's opinion and attitude. Correctional officers are short-staffed and are looking to minimize movement. They would not be open to holding classes outside for fear of escaping and already short staff. Dr. Stephen Steurer said that custody could be open if you properly approach them and consider their needs. John Griffin agreed but said it would depend on the institution.

Karen Esterque echoed that each institution must be considered separately as each one has a different layout, security levels, and needs. Returning citizens and incarcerated students should be consulted on space conversations, as they have intimate knowledge of the institution.

Tanja Murphy agreed, and added that in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, education staff are cross-trained as correctional officers, so they can hold classes without the need for additional officers.

IV. Upcoming conferences

Dr. Andrea Cantora announced that there will be two conferences relevant to higher education programming in prison in April. The first is the Bowie State HBCU Inaugural Higher Education in Prison Summit, and the second is the National Alliance for Higher Education in Prison Annual Conference. Workgroup members are encouraged to attend.

The next workgroup meeting would be on April 24, 2025 at 1pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:02pm.