Higher Education Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

May 29, 2025
1-2pm

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Del. Elizabeth Embry, Ainsley Moench, Richard Gibson, Dr. Charlestine Fairley, Ramieka Robinson-Peoples, Danielle Cox, Dr. Stephen Steurer, John Feaster III, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, Christian Gant, Anne Bocchini Pack

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I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 1:05pm.
Workgroup members introduced themselves.

II. Discussion on draft interim report

Dr. Stephen Steurer went over the interim report process. The report is due in June, and the goal is to keep the main report brief, with more detailed descriptions of the issues for each work group. The Higher Education workgroup is looking over the draft of the interim report and will present it to the full Commission next week for approval. The interim report will then go to the Speaker of the House, President of the Senate, and Governor.

A. Funding

Del. Elizabeth Embry asked about the colleges being “required” to cover costs not covered by the Pell Grant. Danielle Cox and Dr. Andrea Cantora clarified that it's not a legal requirement but a necessity due to the limited Pell grant coverage and regulations preventing charging incarcerated students additional costs. Dr. Judith Lichtenberg offered changing the wording to say that there is a financial burden to colleges to operate higher education in prison (HEP) programs. Gordon Pack agreed and offered to add that colleges must cover operational costs not covered by Pell Grants.

Dr. Charlestine Fairley asked what Pell Grants cover, and how tuition differs between incarcerated students and regular students. Dr. Andrea Cantora explained that while they cover tuition, fees, and some books, they often don't cover the full cost, especially at four-year institutions. Danielle Cox elaborated that the Pell grant allotment for incarcerated individuals often falls short of the total cost, requiring colleges to seek other funding sources. Danielle Cox also pointed out the lack of dedicated state funding for postsecondary education for incarcerated

individuals due to legislative ambiguities, as there is no explicit language stating that incarcerated students are eligible for state aid.She has been working with the Maryland Higher Education Commission to see if there's a way to advance legislation that either allows for a specific supplemental grant for incarcerated students to access state aid, or explicitly state that incarcerated students can access state aid.

Charlestine Fairley said that traditionally, eligible students receive a financial aid packet that covers most costs beyond room and board, suggesting incarcerated students might be treated differently by only receiving Pell Grants. Danielle Cox explained that prison education programs are structured differently with a separate federal funding path, and colleges face unique overhead costs for these programs. Dr. Stephen Steurer proposed that Dr. Andrea Cantora, Danielle Cox, and Dr. Charlestine Fairley collaborate on a paragraph for the addendum to clarify the differences in Pell grant application and funding for incarcerated individuals.

Del. Elizabeth Embry supported focusing on amending COMAR to improve access to existing state funds rather than requesting new funding.

Christian Gant asked if the interim report was focused on creating a "gold standard" or realistic, achievable solutions given current budget restraints. Dr. Stephen Steurer clarified that the current report is focused on detailing the issues the Commission has encountered so far instead of recommending improvements.

B. Technology

Danielle Cox discussed the statement that incarcerated students do not have access to learning management systems (LMS), noting that three of five colleges currently have access to an LMS. Judith Lichtenberg pointed out that access at some institutions, like at Jessup Correctional Institutions, is indirect, going through administrators. Danielle Cox added that Bowie State University has access to an LMS through Origin. Dr. Judith Lichtenberg asked if that meant Bowie State students have direct access to the internet. Danielle Cox clarified that Origin has their own LMS that can work with other LMS, such as Canvas or Blackboard, as well as virtual classes, mentoring, tutoring, and financial aid. Dr. Stephen Steurer asked if access is 24/7 or if it is limited to school. Danielle Cox said that it is limited to schools, as adding access to housing would cost $15 million. The tablets on the housing units have limited access to basic literacy education, and the laptops used in the education department must stay in the education department.

Andrea Cantora emphasized that the current funding for the learning management system through public safety is limited to two years, after which colleges will need to cover the costs. This cost could lead to considering fees for incarcerated students, highlighting the need for increased access to state tuition aid.

Karen Esterque brought up the specific wording that incarcerated students are “blocked” from state aid. Danielle Cox offered changing the wording to “ineligible.”

C. Space

Ramieka Robinson-Peoples raised the idea of pre-release students attending college classes on main campuses as part of pre-release efforts or work assignments. Stephen Steurer recalled a similar program that existed until 1994 but was discontinued due to complaints, despite no evidence of wrongdoing by the participating students. Danielle Cox noted that surveys indicated pre-release individuals often prioritize paid work release over unpaid college attendance, presenting logistical and staffing challenges.

D. Diminution Credits and Incentives

Dr. Judith Lichtenberg questioned whether to specify the amount of diminution credits awarded for different achievements. Danielle Cox explained the complexities of the diminution credit system and the difference in credits one receives for full time and part time educational programming and the completions of a degree. She offered to rewrite the section on diminution credit, and Dr. Andrea Cantora, Karen Esterque, and Anne Bocchini Pack offered to collaborate.

Dr. Judith Lichtenberg questioned the statement about the current law being unbalanced regarding the same number of diminution credits awarded for different educational achievements. Danielle Cox clarified that credits are awarded for each level of completion. Dr. Andrea Cantora explained that the perceived imbalance stems from the varying time it takes to achieve these different credentials, with a bachelor's degree potentially taking much longer than a certificate but yielding the same credit reward at completion. Dr. Andrea Cantora suggested exploring awarding credits after a certain period of participation, especially for students who transfer mid-program. Danielle Cox clarified that students already receive credits (special project and diminution) for program participation, separate from the one-time credit for degree completion.

E. Reentry Support

Gordon Pack asked what happens if a college is no longer able to provide HEP programming. Dr. Andrea Cantora stated the intention would be to transfer students to other existing programs. Danielle Cox clarified that Pell restoration requires institutions to have a "teach-out plan" in case of program closure, outlining how students will complete their studies or transfer. Transfer may not always be possible due to factors like conviction or security level.

Dr. Andrea Cantora introduced a new paragraph on re-entry support, noting input from the University System of Maryland, which added a sentence about seeking funding for this area. Dr. Stephen Steurer expressed support for the importance of re-entry support, drawing a parallel to the need for tools in career tech programs post-release. The group agreed to move forward with this section, focusing remaining efforts on refining the incentives and funding (Pell grant clarification) sections.

III. Adjournment

Dr. Stephen Steurer stated that the interim report needs to be put together for the commission by next Thursday. He clarified that it is a work in progress, and after submitting the interim report, they will continue working on it, conduct more research, and eventually turn issues into recommendations for the November report.

The meeting was adjourned at 2pm.