

Higher Education Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

February 26, 2026

1pm-2pm

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Dr. Andrea Cantora, Ainsley Moench, Dr. Stephen Steurer, John Feaster III, Dr. Tim Stock, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, Zakiya Lee, Danielle Cox, Karen Esterque, Lyndsay Silvia

I. Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 1pm.

II. Discussion on HB 1311 and HB 1313

Dr. Andrea Cantora introduced the two House Bills. Testimony for the bills was due on March 9th. Dr. Tim Stock asked if the testimony had to be in a certain format, and Dr. Stephen Steurer replied that verbal testimony was limited to two minutes, and while there was no formal length for written testimony, it would be best to limit it to around the length of verbal testimony. Virtual testimony was allowed.

Dr. Tim Stock inquired if one of the two bills was better to support over the other. Dr. Stephen Steurer replied that he would personally support both bills.

Zakiya Lee reported that the University System of Maryland institutions are concerned about the fiscal note associated with HB 1313, so institutions would likely submit a letter of information. For HB 1311, the language requiring assistance with federal Pell Grants was concerning. Danielle Cox clarified that the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services provides access to higher education programs to work with students to complete financial aid and FAFSA forms, and that the Department would not be assisting individual students with their financial aid information.

Dr. Judith Lichtenberg volunteered to submit written testimony on behalf of the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform. Dr. Stephen Steurer planned to testify personally, noting that the commission made similar recommendations. Danielle Cox confirmed that DPSCS cannot testify on a bill that affects the department, but has submitted information and a fiscal note detailing their current process for providing financial aid access. Gordon Pack and Dr. Andrea Cantora agreed that having students testify, or submit written testimony, about the impact of education

while incarcerated would be very beneficial. Dr. Tim Stock added that a bill like this could be the difference between a program on the Eastern Shore being sustainable or not, due to fiscal issues faced by institutions.

Dr. Andrea Cantora highlighted that the current PELL grants do not cover the full cost of tuition, and the state financial aid access via these bills is intended to bridge that gap. Danielle Cox and Dr. Stephen Steurer discussed the concern that all state financial aid comes from a "one pot" fund, which means the incarcerated population would be competing for funds with the community, leading to anticipated opposition, particularly for HB 1313.

Dr. Judith Lichtenberg asked about the transparency of the fiscal note, and Zakiya Lee explained that various constituencies submit their own fiscal concerns to the legislators. Danielle Cox confirmed that DPSCS and MHEC (Maryland Higher Education Commission) would submit fiscal notes, which would eventually be compiled into a main report and posted. The current population of incarcerated higher education students across all five participating schools is approximately 325, with around 43 students at the University of Baltimore.

Dr. Andrea Cantora asked Lyndsay Silva for insight into MHEC's position on the bills, particularly HB 1311, and whether MHEC has information on the total amount of money available in the need-based scholarship fund that the incarcerated students would be accessing. Lyndsay Silva agreed to consult with relevant parties and report back.

Dr. Andrea Cantora questioned what potential barriers or issues might exist in how state financial aid is awarded to incarcerated students who have zero income, highlighting that the process is individualized based on need and prior Pell Grant awards. Danielle Cox added that because tuition rates, fee waivers, and program enrollment numbers vary by college and are constantly changing, it would be extremely difficult to calculate the exact cost per college in advance.

Stephen Steurer raised a proactive concern about potential opposition that may seek to exclude individuals based on specific crimes like murder or rape, referencing past discussions at the federal level. Dr. Judith Lichtenberg and Danielle Cox countered this by noting that convicted murderers have low recidivism rates and that placing restrictions would create an administrative burden and would be inequitable since colleges in the community do not ask applicants about their criminal history.

Karen Esterque emphasized the value of highlighting the intergenerational impact of college in prison, such as children of formerly incarcerated students attending college, in testimony.

Danielle Cox discussed several institutions that deprioritized higher education in prison programs, either due to the lack of funds available to support a program or the lack of interest in a program.

Dr. Andrea Cantora suggested that future plans for the group include bringing in New Jersey, which utilizes a model where Princeton offers support and tutoring without having its own

dedicated program. Collaborating with institutions that can contribute support in other ways will be explored further.

III. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 2pm.