

Higher Education Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

January 29, 2026

1pm-2pm

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Dr. Andrea Cantora, Gordon Pack, Richard Gibson, John Feaster III, Dr. Natasha Cornell, Dr. Tim Stock, Meredith Conde, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, Lucy Steinitz, Lyndsay Silva, Zakiya Lee, Danielle Cox, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Christian Gant, Jessica Johnson, Dr. Emily Hainze

I. Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 1pm.

A. Approval of November meeting minutes

The November meeting minutes were approved.

II. Discussion on community college participation in higher education in prison programs

Dr. Andrea Cantora provided an update on potential legislation, stating that she met with Del. Elizabeth Embry to draft bills clarifying statute language to allow incarcerated students to access state financial aid. Danielle Cox asked if the bill would conflict with the requirements for federal aid such as the Pell grant, suggesting that state aid may need to focus on costs other than tuition. Dr. Andrea Cantora confirmed she would share a draft of the bill to work out conflicts.

Dr. Stephen Steurer warned that there may be opposition to the bills, as some legislators may not be in favor of college education for incarcerated individuals. Danielle Cox noted that the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) determined that access to state financial aid would need to be addressed through legislation to mitigate potential community backlash against using tax dollars for college access for incarcerated students.

Dr. Andrea Cantora introduced that the focus of the workgroup for the year would surround community college participation in higher education in prison programs. She emphasized the importance of strong partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions, which is a successful model in other states, to provide more opportunities.

Danielle Cox provided updates on community colleges pursuing Pell-funded programs. Anne Arundel Community College is seeking approval for a business certification program at Dorsey Run Correctional Facility. Hagerstown Community College is awaiting approval for a General Studies AA degree and a welding certification program at MCI-H. Neither program has reached the US Department of Education for submission yet. She expanded that the federal approval process is lengthy, taking potentially up to a year and a half to reach the US Department of Education submission stage due to internal college issues and prior approval steps. The US Department of Education's approval time has recently decreased to about six months, though current backlogs exist due to Second Chance Pell applications. Many community colleges are unwilling to commit the required staff and funding for post-secondary programs behind the fence.

Dr. Stephen Steurer requested an update on higher education on the Eastern Shore. Danielle Cox reported that Wor-Wic Community College withdrew due to the high cost of administering the program, choosing instead to focus on post-release re-entry. Tim Stock, a professor at Salisbury University, provided an update, noting that capacity at ECI remains a major challenge. Tim Stock is meeting with their provost to discuss a refresh of efforts and requested an agency workflow document for effective applications, which Danielle Cox agreed to provide. Tim Stock advised institutions to frame higher education in prison as an access issue to effectively gain institutional support, particularly from institutional access offices.

Christian Gant asked if government efforts could reduce compliance and regulatory costs to ease program operation for colleges. Danielle Cox clarified that the requirements for Prison Education Programs (PEPs) are primarily set by federal legislation, and state laws are in place to ensure compliance, not to exceed the federal standards. Andrea Cantora highlighted that the biggest startup barrier is the requirement for colleges to dedicate full-time staff to act as a liaison for incarcerated students, who cannot apply or communicate with college offices independently.

Andrea Cantora expressed hope that increased technology access within facilities could eventually eliminate some of the liaison work, allowing students to communicate with financial aid and admissions offices. Danielle Cox noted that while technology, such as the Origin platform, will facilitate FAFSA access and advising, some level of support will always be needed due to the complexity of the forms. Danielle Cox shared that Bowie State University is already utilizing the Origin platform for virtual advising and financial aid sessions.

Christian Gant inquired about the commission's role in the legislative session, specifically regarding testimony or submitting letters of support. Ainsley Moench stated that the commission generally does not take stances on legislation, but individual members are welcome to testify on their own behalf, clarifying that they cannot speak for the commission or the work group.

III. Discussion on other key areas for 2026

Dr. Andrea Cantora asked if workgroup members wanted to focus on key areas that were dropped in 2025, namely, technology and incentives.

Christian Gant proposed looking into a model from Maine that allows incarcerated individuals to have full-time remote corporate jobs to help pay off balances upon release.

Tim Stock suggested that diminution credits could be given out for volunteer programs, which are less difficult to operate than a higher education in prison program. Danielle Cox clarified that diminution credits are only given for an individual's actual job assignment, not for volunteer programs, explaining that the college program was made into a job assignment so participants could receive pay and diminution credits. There is a tiered system for diminution credits based on an individual's criminal history or sentence.

Danielle Cox addressed Christian Gant's suggestion about virtual work, stating that they have been trying to get Maryland companies to hire incarcerated individuals for virtual work for almost two years. The main issue is securing employers willing to hire people with criminal backgrounds, pay them minimum wage (which is \$15 an hour in Maryland), and provide comparable wages to outside workers for the same job, which some companies, including one from Delaware, were unwilling to do. Christian Gant raised a question about whether Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE) pays minimum wage to incarcerated workers. Danielle Cox clarified that MCE falls under different rules governed by state laws, but outside companies hiring incarcerated individuals must pay at least minimum wage. Christian Gant brought up that Maine has managed to figure out how to pay incarcerated workers the regular outside wage, suggesting that there might be a solution Maryland could adopt. Stephen Steurer suggested bringing the issue of virtual work and comparable pay up at the career tech committee meeting. Danielle Cox confirmed that MCE workers do get paid minimum wage when a company operates under MCE, but the challenge remains in finding companies willing to pay the comparable outside wage, as Maine does.

Dr. Andrea Cantora suggested keeping the topic of Maine's program as an agenda item for their next meeting, noting that many people might be unaware of the program. Danielle Cox offered to invite Laura Rhodus, the education director from Maine, to speak about their successful programs, though she acknowledged that Maine's smaller size and more liberal nature provide them with more flexibility.

IV. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 2pm.