

Higher Education Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

August 28, 2025

1-2pm

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Dr. Andrea Cantora, Ainsley Moench, Danielle Cox, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Anne Bocchini Pack, Initia Lettau, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, John Feaster III, Karen Esterque Jones, Meredith Conde, Ramieka Robinson, Richard Gibson, Gordon Pack, John Griffin, Benjamin Mourad, Jessica Johnson, Zakiya Lee, Rachel Sander, Rose Dailey, Amanda Owens, Dr. Charles Adams, Christian Gant, Del. Elizabeth Embry, Jamel Freeman, Anne-Marie Hickson, Dr. Charlestine Fairley, Riley Donahue, Terri Erwin, Frances Tracy-Mumford, Ruschelle Reuben, Sec. Sanjay Rai, Casey O'Brien, Emily Hainze, Elyshia Aseltine

I. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 1 pm.

A. Overview of the recommendation process

Ainsley Moench outlined the plan for the next two meetings, which will focus on discussing and approving recommendations and issue descriptions for the annual report. Attendees were encouraged to submit recommendations via email.

II. Presentation from the [State University of New York Higher Education Office](#)

Rachel Sander and Casey O'Brien from the State University of New York (SUNY) presented on the Office of Higher Education in Prison.

The office started as a research project five years ago and has grown significantly, now with a team of nine, soon to be twelve. This growth is attributed to the leadership of Chancellor John King and the reinstatement of Pell Grants.

The office is housed within the Office of Student Success, signaling that incarcerated students are integral to SUNY's vision of student success and equity. SUNY has been involved in higher education in prison since 1970, with significant re-engagement after Pell and TAP funding reinstatement.

Enrollment in SUNY's prison programs has increased since 2015, serving 700-800 students per semester, though COVID-19 significantly impacted in-person programming. They noted the geographical disparity of prisons in New York and the limited historical opportunities for higher education in prison in rural areas. Only a small percentage of the 30,000 incarcerated individuals are currently enrolled in college, indicating significant potential for growth.

The office provides technical assistance and financial support to campuses building programs, including equity fund dollars for staffing, computer labs, and student support. They also offer statewide academic re-entry support to students six months prior to release and for at least one year upon return to the community, facilitating seamless transfers.

While SUNY provides some funding, a large portion comes from external grants, with efforts underway to transition more personnel costs to state funding.

SUNY focuses on serving rural areas, advocating for hybrid instruction to increase access. Chancellor King's leadership has shifted institutional culture, leading to increased interest from presidents in starting programs.

Approximately 60% of incarcerated individuals are technically eligible for higher education by corrections standards. There is a growing interest in Bachelor's and Master's programs, with a few privately funded Master's programs existing in New York correctional facilities.

SUNY HEP works with students six months prior to release with a trauma-informed, holistic reentry navigation model. Students are supported for a minimum of one year post-release with both academic and non-academic needs.

A. Q+A

Zakiya Lee asked how many people the SUNY HEP Office employed. Rachel Sander replied that nine people currently work in the office, with three positions soon to be filled.

Ainsley Moench asked if SUNY HEP was involved with reinstating the Tuition Assistance Program for incarcerated students in New York. Rachel Sander replied that while the office did not directly advocate, other college providers were instrumental in getting it passed.

John Griffin asked how the Office was funded. Casey O'Brien answered that the State University of New York provides a small amount, but a majority of the funding comes from grants. Rachel Sander added that part of her job is to get public dollars to replace private dollars. Dr. Andrea Cantora asked what the

matchmaking process was like between SUNY, CUNY, and community colleges. Rachel Sander clarified that CUNY is far away from any prisons, so CUNY only has a presence in one facility. However, CUNY is resource-rich for reentry. Rural colleges may have more difficulty with reentry work. There is a big push for hybrid programs to compensate for the lack of space in some facilities and provide digital literacy. While getting colleges on board with providing prison education programs has been difficult in the past, many colleges are now eager to join. There is difficulty in working with both public and private colleges to ensure every student has an option that works for them, as well as the ability to transfer to different institutions.

Dr. Judith Lichtenberg asked about the proportion of incarcerated students interested in higher education. Rachel Sander replied that 60% are technically eligible by corrections standards, with potential to serve an additional 8,000 to 9,000, aiming for a third of the population, or 10% enrolled (00:33:40). They mentioned that while associate degree completions are high, there's a growing interest in Bachelor's and Master's programs, noting the existence of a few privately funded Master's programs in New York correctional facilities.

Rachel Sander inquired about how to serve students who may struggle with tuition. Dr. Andrea Cantora explained that the University of Baltimore uses private funds for non-Pell eligible students, often for temporary situations or when families pay tuition. Danielle Cox affirmed that all Maryland colleges ensure that no accepted student is turned away due to Pell ineligibility, utilizing private funds, endowments, and tuition waivers.

III. Presentation from the [Virginia Consensus for Higher Education in Prison](#)

Dr. Terri Erwin from the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy presented on Virginia's Higher Education in Prison Initiative, the Virginia Consensus for Higher Education and Prison.

Dr. Terri Erwin highlighted the tension between higher education and corrections cultures in Virginia, especially post-COVID, when programs shut down without a pivot to remote instruction. She noted the lack of a unified voice for program expansion and technology access on behalf of incarcerated Virginians. Concerns were also raised about predatory for-profit universities.

Virginia has 45 state prisons with 23,000 incarcerated individuals, but only four Second Chance Pell schools, serving a small fraction of the 67% who are academically eligible. The importance of addressing scale and modernizing program delivery, particularly regarding technology access, was emphasized. She

stressed the need to build public awareness and political will for higher education in prison, treating it as a matter of public policy

Six key sectors were identified as allies in building a coordinating table: higher education, corrections, justice-impacted individuals, businesses, economic development, and faith communities. The initiative's exploratory phase was internally funded, followed by a two-year planning grant from the Ascendium Foundation. She emphasized the importance of addressing incarcerated individuals as incarcerated Virginians, to remind people that the students are people in the community and families. She emphasized the challenge of navigating complex political landscapes.

A. Q+A

Danielle Cox thanked Dr. Terri Erwin for her presentation and noted that Maryland is attempting to make their own state consortium through the Maryland State University System. She asked how to keep state consortia running, especially regarding funding. Dr. Terri Erwin responded that the first year of research was funded by the Virginia Interfaith Center, and afterward, another staff person was able to be hired through a two-year planning Ascendium grant. Danielle Cox commented that perhaps she and Zakiya should contact Ascendium for funding. Dr. Terri Erwin advised building relationships with various sectors, especially the business community, for securing state funding. Danielle Cox shared that Maryland has longitudinal data on post-secondary program graduates and labor market needs, which could be used to align degree programs with employment opportunities.

Danielle Cox asked if VCHEP had partnerships with the business community. Dr. Terri Erwin confirmed that VCHEP partnered with the Virginia Chamber of Commerce for Second Chance Month, highlighting the economic urgency for businesses to consider returning citizens as employees.

Danielle Cox asked John Feaster III if perhaps someone from the Workforce Development Board would be able to sit on the state consortium to inform about employment opportunities post-release. John Feaster III agreed, but cautioned that the Department of Labor does not control the Board, which would need to make that decision independently.

IV. Adjournment

Andrea Cantora concluded the meeting by thanking all presenters and attendees.

The meeting adjourned at 2pm.