



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Education Justice Project
1001 S. Wright St.
Champaign, IL 61820

September 16, 2025

Joint Committee on Administrative Rules
700 Stratton Building
Springfield, IL 62706
jcar@ilga.gov

Re: Opposition to Emergency Rule on Mail and Publications in Illinois Prisons

Dear Members of the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules,

I write on behalf of the leadership team of the Education Justice Project (EJP), based at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. While we are faculty and staff at the University, this statement does not represent the views of the University. It reflects our perspectives as individuals with almost four decades of experience, collectively, providing and supporting higher education in U.S. prisons and witnessing its profound benefits, which flow to incarcerated students, staff, families, and society as a whole.

We are deeply concerned about the emergency amendment issued by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) on August 15, 2025, restricting mail and publications for people incarcerated in Illinois. These restrictions, if implemented, would create significant new barriers to education.

The need to increase access to higher education in Illinois' prisons is already acute. According to IDOC's FY25 Higher Education Report, **1,977 individuals living in Illinois prisons last year were enrolled in postsecondary programs** while another **2,047 were on wait lists**. Some individuals remain on these lists for years. In other words, for every ten individuals studying in Illinois prisons, ten more were waiting for a chance to begin. Put simply, for every student sitting in a classroom, another was left outside the door.

For those unable to secure a classroom seat, correspondence courses, independent study, and self-directed reading—facilitated by mail and access to books—are essential alternatives. We see this all the time. Individuals stop us on the prison walk to tell us that they would love to enroll in the U of I's program (which is free), but cannot because they are not able to gain entrance into a community college program, which would enable them to earn the required number of lower-division credits to transfer to U of I. Instead, they have decided to pay for a

private correspondence course. Their participation in such programs depends on their having access to assigned books and other instructional materials. The proposed rule, by restricting how family and friends can provide such books, will restrict a vital route to self-improvement.

All of this is particularly troubling, given the timing. Within weeks of IDOC's own report documenting that **almost 8% of individuals in Illinois prisons were on a wait list in hopes of enrolling in post-secondary courses**, the department proposed a rule that would make it even harder for incarcerated people to pursue their educational goals.

This is unfortunate not just for them, but for the State of Illinois generally. Decades of research confirm that higher education in prison benefits everyone: it improves safety for incarcerated individuals and staff, supports positive reentry outcomes, increases employability after release, and promotes educational gains for children of incarcerated parents. The proposed restrictions would weaken these benefits and make Illinois' prisons less safe.

We also note that Public Act 103-0541, signed into law last year, requires IDOC to study the sources of contraband. That study should be completed before implementing changes of this magnitude. Without such data, this rule risks imposing costly and ineffective barriers to education without making a difference with respect to contraband. Further, understanding why incarcerated people turn to contraband in the first place—whether to cope with depression, trauma, or unmet health needs—would support more meaningful, evidence-based solutions.

Illinois has made important strides in expanding access to higher education in prison in the past ten years, in large part due to the energetic efforts of IDOC educational administrators. However, this progress is fragile. Emergency measures that restrict mail and books will slow momentum and undermine bipartisan goals of promoting public safety, strengthening families, and enhancing economic opportunity. Illinois has the opportunity to be a national leader in expanding educational access in prison; this rule moves us in the opposite direction.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge JCAR to disapprove or suspend the proposed emergency rule. Instead, we encourage a deliberative process informed by the legislatively mandated contraband study and developed in consultation with stakeholders, including educators, students, and their families.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R. Ginsburg', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rebecca Ginsburg
Associate Professor and Director
On Behalf of the EJP Leadership Team
rginsbur@illinois.edu