



EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT
an initiative of Education at Illinois

HJR 27: Higher Education in Prison Task Force

LEGISLATIVE HEARING, APPROPRIATIONS - PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE
MAY 05, 2021

Testimony of Rebecca Ginsburg, EJP Director

Good Afternoon. I'm an Associate Professor in Education Policy at the University of Illinois and co-founder and director of the Education Justice Project, which has offered academic programming at Danville Correctional Center since 2008.

Illinois is doing a fair job of providing higher education to individuals in prison.

That said, most of the state's current programs are run out of a single facility, Stateville, the prison nearest to Chicago. That's made coordination of those programs relatively simple.

But we want and expect the number of college-in-prison programs to grow. Augustana, Eastern Illinois, Millikin, and Adler are currently developing new programs. Now that Pell funding has been restored for incarcerated students, we anticipate even more universities to do so, and to seek to partner with

more prisons.

That's great, but unfortunately, there's currently no framework within which to manage this expansion. Illinois' prison education programs operate within an unstructured, almost wild-west environment. We lack a coherent process for supporting, protecting, and assessing these programs and the good work that they do.

This resolution offers a solution. It creates a task force that will get us from where we are to where we want to be. In particular, the task force will:

One, collect and analyze existing data related to higher education in Illinois prisons;

Two, identify those data points that IDOC should collect. This step can be informed by current best practices. I've put two documents in the chat that can guide the task force in this regard.

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“When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization concluded. If anything, the needs for identity and self-respect are more compelling in the dehumanizing prison environment.”

- Thurgood Marshall

Three, assess the barriers and opportunities that IDOC currently imposes upon universities and colleges and upon incarcerated individuals who wish to participate in educational programming.

Four, create a legislative action plan that identifies steps the state can take to make Illinois a national exemplar for quality higher education in prison.

To conclude, the benefits of providing higher education to people in prison are well-established. Please impose some order and protections upon this important activity, and please be ambitious. Illinois was once the national leader in prison education. We

were the first state in the country to offer for-credit courses in prison and the first to offer a degree to people in prison, both in the 1950s. Many other states modelled their programs after ours. Let's reclaim our status as a leader in providing opportunity and hope to incarcerated individuals.

We don't want the wild wild west. Data-driven approaches, commitment to best practices, and legislative oversight are what people in prison, their families, and our communities are counting on, as they trust us to move forward boldly in creating a safer and more just Illinois.

Thank you.

Testimony of Pablo Mendoza, EJP Alummus

I would like to thank the Appropriations Public Safety Committee and everyone here for granting us an audience. I am Pablo Mendoza and I'm an organizer and activist focusing on expanding education in prison and reentry. I was a student while incarcerated.

The task force that Prof. Ginsburg described in her testimony could help to find a solution to a major hurdle for higher education in prison in Illinois, access. The state currently has a protocol in place that gives preferential treatment to those closer to their release date. I was personally affected by this policy as I sat in prison with a 24-year sentence. I found a way around this specific restriction only to be met with additional restrictions. It took me 13 years to complete a 2-year degree. Should anyone have to fight so hard to better themselves? We need a system that makes it easier for the other Pablos in Illinois to get an education.

Persistence paid off, and I secured a spot in the Education Justice Project out of the University of Illinois. My involvement in higher education changed my life because it set me up for a successful reentry. Now I am taking classes at the University of Chicago and have enrolled in Northeastern Illinois

University as part of their University Without Walls program. This resolution seeks to make it possible for me to be the norm and not an anomaly.

I share my experience with you to stress that persistence and luck in an institution sworn to rehabilitate cannot be our reality in Illinois. Education is vital to the rehabilitative process. We need to expand higher education in prison in our state and we need policies that support this goal. This resolution gives us the opportunity to do that by assessing where we are and providing a road map to our collective futures.

Rehabilitative measures should not be this difficult to attain in a prison setting. I assist individuals in their reentry and see how difficult my life would have been if not for my persistence and luck pursuing my education. It's imperative that we address the systematic hurdles that hinder progress. No one should have to be lucky when wholeheartedly fighting to change course. We have an opportunity to do better in Illinois by taking the initial step to expand HEP by passing this resolution. We don't need luck. Let's figure out where we are and chart a plan forward. Please pass HJR27.

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