



**House Judiciary Committee
House Bill 1086
Compensation for Individuals Erroneously Convicted - Alterations
Wednesday, February 21, 2024
Favorable**

Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on House Bill 1086. The bill would amend the Walter Lomax Act so that, among other things, individuals who have been erroneously convicted, sentenced, and confined will have access to eight (8) years rather than five (5) years of paid educational benefits provided by a State institution of higher education. The University System of Maryland (USM) supports the change to the law.

The USM comprises twelve distinguished institutions, and three regional higher education centers. We award eight out of every ten bachelor's degrees in the State. Each of the USM's 12 institutions has a distinct and unique approach to the mission of educating students and promoting the economic, intellectual, and cultural growth of its surrounding community. These institutions are located throughout the state, from Western Maryland to the Eastern Shore, with the flagship campus in the Washington suburbs. The USM includes three Historically Black Institutions, comprehensive and research universities, and the country's largest public online institution.

The Walter Lomax Act aims to assist individuals in putting their lives back on track after they have been unfairly derailed. The USM demonstrates every year for tens of thousands of students that a degree can change a person's life for the better. National data repeatedly demonstrate that a bachelor's degree enhances lifetime earnings dramatically. The impact is even greater if the student has little or no student debt. But there are other benefits as well, including a longer life span. A 2023 Brookings Institution study found that in 2019, there was a six-year gap between those with and without a degree (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/accounting-for-the-widening-mortality-gap-between-american-adults-with-and-without-a-ba/>). As of 2021, this gap widened to almost nine years. Earning a bachelor's degree can literally help give back years to someone who may have missed out on the opportunity, at least in part because of incarceration.

For adults who do not have a bachelor's degree, it can easily take more than four years to complete a degree. The four-year timeline assumes no need for developmental education. It also assumes a consistent full-time load, with little to no need to repeat any courses. For people who have been away from school, especially if they have been away from mathematics, some developmental work may be needed to prepare for college entry. Even if one does not need developmental education, a person may not want to take a full credit load every term. The minimum full-time load is 12 credits per semester: unless a person earns credits in the summer or during a winter term, a 12-credit load amounts to a five-year timeline for degree completion.

But many adults who have not had the experience of incarceration find that earning a degree on a part-time basis works better for them. Students are advised to attempt as many credits as they can per semester because a shorter timeline generally corresponds to a higher completion rate. But every person's life is unique, and many students cannot carry a full-time load every term. People with family responsibilities, for example, may simply not be able to be a caretaker and a full-time student, regardless of their financial situation. Students may also need more time to balance their mental health needs with their educational goals, at least for some terms.

Each institution has policies about how long a person may take to earn a bachelor's degree. The maximum is often 7 years but can extend to at least 10 at some institutions, especially if they have more of an access to education mission. A student could also spend a year or two at a community college and then six years at a four-year institution; indeed, a national metric is if community college transfer students earn a bachelor's degree after six years at a senior public institution. The bill thus opens the door for more kinds of experiences to be considered. It makes it more likely that a person starting from the beginning of a college degree would have the time to complete the degree while funded.

The extension of time in this bill could mean that a person could embark on a graduate or professional program after earning an undergraduate degree. That would be an unlikely event but one to celebrate.

To maximize this opportunity for those who have been erroneously sentenced, we urge you to pass this bill.

Thank you for allowing the USM to share our position on House Bill 1086.



Contact:

Andy Clark
 Assistant Vice Chancellor, Government Relations
 301.741.3972
aclark@usmd.edu