

HB416: REAP (Resources and Education for All Prisons) Act

My name is Judith Lichtenberg. I'm professor emerita of philosophy at Georgetown, and I'm on the executive committee of the [Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform](#) (MAJR), where I co-chair the Behind the Walls Workgroup.

More important for my purposes here, however, is that I've been teaching college courses, tutoring, and mentoring incarcerated people at Jessup since 2016 (and at the DC Jail starting a year or two later). Not to be too dramatic, the experiences I've had there have been life-changing. And this isn't peculiar to me: ask anyone who's taught in prison and they'll likely tell you how the experience transformed them.

Why is that? Several reasons, I think. The men (my students have mostly been men) are incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to study philosophy; they're hungry to learn; they bring experiences your standard undergraduate student doesn't (to say the least). By the time they become my students, they've had a few years (often way more than that) to reflect on what brought them to prison, to grow and change. Many of them came to prison without a high school diploma; they have gotten their GEDs and have gradually come to see the benefits of education, both practical and intrinsic. Rarely do teachers make a difference to the lives of their students in the way prison teachers do.

But you are members of the Appropriations Committee, so I understand that you're interested in costs and benefits and bottom lines. In his testimony my colleague Stephen Steurer gives you the striking facts and figures showing that [prison education reduces recidivism rates](#), so I won't repeat those here. It's not exactly rocket science: to succeed in the world outside the walls, people need education and job skills. The dismal lack of those is partly what led them down the wrong path in the first place. But the opportunities for education in Maryland's prisons are in short supply. There is a waiting list for the Pell Grant college programs. The Prison Scholars Program at JCI—which offered noncredit but college-level courses—was abruptly shut down when the Pell Grant program started up, despite its quality and popularity. Only a very small proportion of JCI prisoners—about 15 percent—take part in any kind of education program. We desperately need more of them.

The revival of more widely available Pell Grants makes that goal realizable. Ironically, however, the number of GEDs awarded to prisoners has declined shockingly over the last twenty years. There are a variety of reasons for this decline, but it must be reversed if we want to reduce the recidivism rate and help incarcerated people become productive citizens who can succeed when they come home, as 95 percent of them will.

We need a good grasp of the facts about prison education in Maryland and about the incentives to increase opportunities for it if we are to reduce our prison populations and use our financial resources wisely. For this purpose the REAP bill recommends the creation of a

Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission to investigate how prison education programs are run and to recommend improvements.

As a 2017 [report](#) about prison education in Maryland from the Abell Foundation put it, “lower rates of recidivism and higher rates of employment and engagement are good for business, good for taxpayers, and good for communities.” And for these outcomes prison education is an essential tool.

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