



## MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Citizens working to reform criminal justice in Maryland



[www.MA4JR.org](http://www.MA4JR.org)

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### Testimony in support of HB209: Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission

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](http://www.MA4JR.org) (MAJR), where I co-chair the Behind the Walls Workgroup. Equally important for my purposes here, however, is that I've been teaching college courses, tutoring, and mentoring incarcerated people at Jessup Correctional Institution since 2016, through the University of Baltimore, and more recently at Patuxent Institution, through Georgetown University. 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.

We know that [prison education reduces recidivism rates](#). 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 incarcerated people 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. 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 radically 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. HB209 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.

MAJR urges you to give a favorable report to HB209.

Respectfully,

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Testimony for the Maryland House of Delegates Judiciary Committee, March 7, 2024.