

Witness Testimony in Response to HB1311

Timothy Stock, Professor of Philosophy (Salisbury University)

Disposition: Favorable

Comments:

I write in strong support of HB1311 to allow state support for incarcerated people who seek opportunities in higher education. This bill would have a dramatic impact on the ability for institutions of higher learning to make fiscally sustainable Prison Education Programs available to all incarcerated Marylanders. Without this bill incarcerated Marylanders of the Eastern Shore and Western Maryland would face continued discrimination in access to higher education.

I have acted as coordinator of the Eastern Correctional Institution (ECI) Book Discussion Program from 2012-2024, and as coordinator and coach of the ECI Ethics Bowl Program since 2020. These are all volunteer programs facilitated by the Department of Philosophy in partnership with the ECI Libraries since 2000. They replicate collegiate level discussions, and confer skills in critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and oral communication. They are also deeply humanizing activities, and allow the opportunity to discuss questions of responsibility, forgiveness, the common good, and freedom in a way that is rehabilitative.

By measure of plaudits and kudos the program has been a success. It received an Official Citation from the General Assembly 2016 led by a delegation of Eastern Shore representatives and these activities were a component of my recognition by the University System of Maryland for Excellence in Teaching in 2024, as well as several other university and community awards. After 12 years of recruiting and training volunteers, over a thousand hours of volunteering my own teaching services, yearslong efforts engaging in program development and advocacy, I can confidently assert that I have as much experience with carceral education as is possible for a lay person. Yet this success has never translated into college credit for my students.

Plaudits and kudos are cheap. As committed as I am to volunteer service, my goal has always been to convert this legacy partnership into a properly resourced Eastern Shore Prison Education Project (PEP) at SU, and in collaboration with other Eastern Shore institutions of higher education. Incarcerated people are

underserved when it comes to opportunities to engage in rehabilitation through higher education, and ECI currently has no access to higher education at all.

I see two problems with this situation. First, I find it ethically problematic that I am forced by circumstance to bring “zero dollar” initiatives to an under-resourced population. Sustaining them, getting them registered for diminution credits, conducting research and even getting supplies have all been major challenges (for clarity—a student taking a college class is paid a \$2/day student wage and receives time off their sentences, in my program, students doing similar college-level work are not receiving these benefits). The volunteer status means that staff can cancel my students’ movement and access at the drop of the hat. My students’ work is often the lowest priority.

Secondly, there are questions of equity for the incarcerated people themselves; access to higher education should not be an arbitrary function of the facility in which a person resides. I struggle to recruit and develop students, and yet success does not mean I get to work with them—it means they transfer somewhere else. What of the remaining men for whom a transfer is not practical or possible? They must make do.

I have advocated vociferously to three separate SU presidents, and three separate SU provosts, as well as numerous Deans and program directors, that SU needs to step into the gap and provide these services. Despite great sympathy and appreciation for my work, the fiscal barriers have always proved insurmountable.

Tuition at SU is not fully covered by Pell. Were an income-qualifying student on SU’s campus to fall short of tuition funds awarded by Pell, state higher education funds would fill the gap. My incarcerated students, the majority of whom (if not all of whom) are income-qualifying, cannot currently access those funds. Pell itself will not create a large enough funding stream for a higher education program to be sustainable. Without these fiscal guarantees, it’s impossible for an SU administrator to commit to the staffing needs and the massive logistical enterprise of running a PEP. Wor-Wic Community College recently withdrew their support of several certificate programs for this very reason.

Allowing my students access to additional state funding would directly solve the fiscal problem at the heart of our lack of an Eastern Shore PEP despite well-intentioned efforts to make it happen. **Passing this legislation would be the difference between providing the opportunity for higher education to the**

incarcerated population of the Eastern Shore, or not. Quite simply, it would allow deserving students to pay for college as would any other Maryland resident, and it would allow institutions of higher learning to effectively dedicate resources to this population and allow SU to realize its public mission through engagement, inclusion, and rehabilitation of incarcerated people.

After so many years of engaging in volunteer rehabilitation, I've had the good fortune of meeting many of my former students after successful release. Just three months ago, I was contacted by a former captain of our Ethics Bowl team that he was enrolled at the University of Baltimore on the outside and is pursuing his dream. Another is starting a business, and a third is intervening with addicted youth on the verge of being system-involved. From each I hear consistently that our programs are the first time they had seen themselves in a collegiate frame of mind. There are excellent potential students in our state prisons, many of whom have conflicted feelings about the value of education, or ambivalence about the under-resourced educational experiences they have had in the past. They have skills and life experiences that they can bring as benefits to others in our community and have deep awareness of the areas of our incarceration system that need improvement and reform. College would be necessary to realize many of these benefits. Time and again my students move from the tiniest sliver of a view into the world of higher learning, to college enrollment, graduation, and reintegration. Please address this structural fiscal inequity so that more of our incarcerated people can find their way to that productive and humane mindset.