



The Illinois Department of Corrections

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Illinois Department of Corrections Announces Comprehensive College Education in Prison Policy

(Springfield, IL) – October 3rd marked the first day that the Illinois Department of Corrections' (IDOC) new policy on post-secondary education went into effect across the state. This policy, written with input from experts from the Vera Institute of Justice, is designed to address long-standing challenges identified by two-year and four-year college partners that may have previously obstructed individuals in custody from completing degrees while incarcerated.

Illinois is one of only a few states to create a statewide policy for post-secondary education in correctional facilities. Unlike other states, however, IDOC's new policy incorporates many of the forthcoming changes to the oversight of prison education programs as outlined in the proposed regulations for Pell reinstatement released by the U.S. Department of Education in July 2022. The adoption of this policy gives IDOC one of the most direct and comprehensive policies around the delivery of post-secondary education in prison in the country and can serve as a valuable model for other jurisdictions in preparation for Pell benefit restoration in 2023.

"We are proud of this new policy, the thoughtfulness that went into writing it, and the input IDOC collected from colleges, staff members, national experts, and formerly incarcerated students," **said IDOC Director Rob Jeffreys**. "We believe this new guidance will be clearer and easier to interpret for staff and provide our post-secondary partners a stronger foundation to build their programs. We're particularly grateful to the Vera Institute for its assistance and expertise. They helped us to keep Pell reinstatement front and center."

"IDOC and college collaboration are crucial to ensuring quality postsecondary education in prisons. This relationship will be vital when Pell Grant eligibility is reinstated for people in prison and new federal regulations take effect," **said Vera Institute of Justice's Unlocking Potential Initiative Director Margaret diZerega**. "With the release of this policy, the Illinois DOC is demonstrating they are a partner in efforts to expand access to higher education in Illinois prisons and can be a leader among states preparing for Pell reinstatement."

Mission: To serve justice in Illinois and increase public safety by promoting positive change in individuals in custody behavior, operating successful reentry programs, and reducing victimization.

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IDOC's new policy will create significant changes to post-secondary education programs inside facilities, including introducing a standard set of directives to follow. In addition, the policy establishes transfer holds for students, eliminates the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) requirement for access, and develops a process to expand existing and new programs with prospective college partners. The full policy is available [here](#).

The Department has also adopted a new comprehensive memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU identifies common guiding principles between IDOC and college partners that form the basis for collaboration. It specifically addresses how college partners will continue to serve students following release from prison, among other considerations. This guidance will bring greater consistency across college partnerships in IDOC and help further articulate the expectations of all parties involved.

"Providing clearer guidance will help us expand post-secondary education programs in our facilities," said **IDOC Assistant Director Alyssa Williams**. "We need more educational opportunities for individuals in custody – especially in central and southern Illinois. This policy comes at a critical time for post-secondary education in prison, and we are hopeful these changes will situate us to leverage Pell funding as soon as it's reinstated."

The Department provides Career and Technical Education (CTE) and academic post-secondary opportunities to individuals in IDOC facilities across the states through partnerships with community colleges and public and private 4-year colleges and universities. These partnerships are made possible through a combination of state funds, donations, endowments, and at a select few sites, the use of federal Pell grants. The Department is actively seeking to expand these partnerships, with a specific emphasis on reaching the many correctional facilities far from Chicagoland. To that end, the Department worked with the University of Chicago Crime Lab to produce a [statewide map](#) of IDOC facilities and post-secondary providers.

"This new map is a substantial step forward for us," said **Jennifer Parrack, IDOC's Chief of Programs**. "It will help IDOC identify logical colleges to forge ties with and, we hope, assist interested colleges to understand the geography and needs of IDOC as well."

"We at Lake Land College appreciate the Department of Corrections' work and leadership on correctional education. Post-secondary education within a correctional environment can be difficult, but it is critical in helping individuals in custody to successfully re-enter the labor market after release. This new policy will provide colleges like Lake Land College with clear guidelines that ensure the safety as well as the success of students and staff," said **Lake Land College President, Josh Bullock**.

"APEP has been pleased to contribute to the process to clarify pathways to education across the state. The leadership, vision, and collaboration that it took to draft these clarifying policies is to be commended. This new directive is a game-changer for Illinois. Illinois families, communities, and employers will be better for the inclusion of healthy educational programming that offers a dignified return. This is hope for a better tomorrow for all of us," said **Dr. Sharon M. Varallo, Executive Director of Augustana Prison Education Program**.

“JHA often hears from people in prison that educational programming and achievement is the most, or even only, positive in their life in prison, as well as from many others desperate to be involved in limited opportunities while incarcerated. It is vital that IDOC expand educational access within prisons; adapting and modernizing rules is a critical step to make this happen. Everyone, wherever they are, must be empowered to strive, grow, and achieve and put their knowledge and experience to good use,” said **Gwyn Troyer, Director of Prison Monitoring Project at John Howard Association.**

“We know we have plenty of room for improvement before we are a national leader in this space - however, we are making positive progress,” said **Maria Miller, IDOC’s Manager of the Office of Adult Education and Vocational Services.** “We are hopeful that this policy and the restoration of Pell benefits next year will help us make meaningful expansions to improve the experience of men and women in our custody both before release and once they’ve returned home.”

A variety of studies have demonstrated that post-secondary education programs in prisons are effective investments that reduce prison costs. Those with the opportunity to enroll and complete college courses are considerably less likely to recidivate and pose fewer disciplinary challenges while incarcerated. Individuals who participate in prison education programs are also more likely to have gainful employment with life-sustaining wages upon release.

If you are interested in establishing a college in prison program inside an IDOC facility, please reach out to Maria Miller at Maria.A.Miller@illinois.gov.

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