
Higher Education Committee

HB 1704

Brief Description: Enhancing public safety and reducing recidivism through postsecondary education.

Sponsors: Representatives Pettigrew, Haler, Reykdal, Zeiger, Tarleton, Sells, Pollet, Klippert, Appleton, Goodman, Santos, Fey and Hudgins.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Eliminates the statutory provision that prohibits the Department of Corrections (DOC) from using state funds to pay for postsecondary education programs.
- Adjusts statutory provisions related to providing postsecondary degree programs to inmates.
- Adds technical college programs to the list of higher education institutions that may be considered for offering postsecondary education degree programs.
- Provides that an inmate may be selected to participate in a postsecondary education degree program based on priority determined by the DOC.
- Requires the DOC, in coordination with the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, to submit an annual evaluation to the Office of Financial Management and the Legislature.

Hearing Date: 2/11/15

Staff: Megan Mulvihill (786-7304).

Background:

Legislation enacted in 1995 required that the Department of Corrections (DOC) prioritize resources for education. The DOC was required, to the extent possible and considering available funds, to prioritize its resources to meet the goals for incarcerated inmates. The agency had to prioritize its goals in the following order: (1) achievement of basic academic skills through obtaining a high school diploma or its equivalent, and achievement of vocational skills necessary

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for purposes of work programs, and for an inmate to qualify for work upon release; (2) additional work and education programs based on assessments and placements; and (3) other work and education programs as appropriate.

In 2007 legislation was enacted that required the DOC to reprioritize its resources to meet the goals for inmates in the following specific order: (1) achievement of basic academic skills through obtaining a high school diploma or its equivalent; (2) achievement of vocational skills necessary for purposes of work programs and for an inmate to qualify for work upon release; (3) additional work and education programs necessary for compliance with an offender's individual re-entry plan; and (4) any other appropriate vocational, work, or education programs that are not necessary for compliance with an offender's individual reentry plan. The DOC was explicitly prohibited from paying for postsecondary education. Any inmate that expressed interest in postsecondary courses had to self-pay or receive funding from a third party to cover the costs of a postsecondary education degree program.

The DOC has developed a process for offenders interested in participating in self-paid postsecondary academic, vocational, and theology programs through correspondence education. Correspondence education is a method of providing educational courses, or a series of classes, necessary to obtain or achieve a proficiency standard by mailing lessons and exercises through the mail. Courses must be through an accredited educational institution that meets all criteria necessary to gain accreditation recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, or one of the approved accrediting commissions or councils listed in the DOC's policy.

Summary of Bill:

The DOC is permitted to implement postsecondary education degree programs if funds are appropriated for the specific purpose or through grants and donations. Additionally, the DOC is authorized to actively solicit grants and donations from private sources for the purposes of providing postsecondary education.

The DOC must consider any postsecondary education degree program from an accredited community or technical college, college, or university that is part of an associate of arts, baccalaureate, master of arts, or other graduate degree program.

An inmate may be selected to participate in a postsecondary education degree program, based on priority criteria determined by the DOC. An inmate not meeting the DOC's priority criteria for the state-funded postsecondary education degree program must pay the costs for participation in a postsecondary education degree program if the inmate elects to participate in the program. The inmate may pay for the program through self-pay or may receive funding from a third party.

By December 1, 2014, and by December 1 annually, the DOC, in coordination with the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, must submit a report to the Office of Financial Management and the appropriate fiscal and policy committees of the Legislature that evaluate the DOC's postsecondary education program. The evaluation must include the criteria established by the DOC for offender participation in the postsecondary education program, progress made implementing the program, and outcome data measuring the impacts of the program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on 02/03/15.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.