



Freedom to Learn IL

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Freedom to Learn Campaign of Illinois

Higher education in prison can transform lives, producing personal, social, and economic benefits for incarcerated individuals, their families, and the broader society. To live up to its potential, such programming has to operate under supportive conditions. At a Subject Matter Hearing on July 8, 2019, Illinois state legislators expressed concern about the recent censorship of books in prisons and the need for advancing efforts to promote higher education in prison.

The Freedom to Learn Campaign calls for clear and fair statewide policies that allow incarcerated students to pursue their studies free from undue interference or interruption of academic and intellectual pursuits. In particular, the Freedom to Learn Campaign advocates for:

Freedom to Pursue Higher Education While in Prison

Practices for higher education in prison vary across Illinois' prisons. Policies should be put in place to expand access to college programs. All academically eligible students should be able to enroll in college, with no bars based upon criteria such as length of sentences, age, or criminal charges.

Freedom from Transfer

Transfers between facilities are common within Illinois, disrupting the academic progress of many people. Other states have a "transfer hold" for those in education programs so they cannot be sent to another prison unless there is a clear and pressing need. This should also be policy in Illinois.

Freedom from Censorship

Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass are just two of the dozens of titles that have recently been banned from prison classrooms by the IDOC. Book approval policies should be transparent and fair, with clear procedures. There should be an independent appeals process.

Freedom to Continue Education Upon Release

Many incarcerated students wish to continue their education upon release. Illinois needs policies that support diploma and degree completion, such as:

- Requiring state colleges and universities to designate staff who will be trained to support and respond to the special needs of individuals with criminal records.
- Allowing formerly incarcerated students to maintain professional contact with the programs they studied with while in prison for assistance with references, letters of recommendation, etc.

Almost 500 individuals and organizations have signed on to the Freedom To Learn campaign to date, including Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison, Education Justice Project of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Prison Neighborhood Arts Project, Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, John Howard Association of Illinois, Illinois Humanities Council, and American Library Association.