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Dear Acting Commissioner of NY-DOCCS Anthony Annucci:

As providers of college programs in New York's correctional facilities, we are writing to express our commitment to working in partnership with the state to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. There are both immediate and long-term implications of the current interruption that require our collective attention and action.

Over the years, we have proudly partnered with DOCCS to expand access to higher education to students during incarceration. As we confront this unprecedented public health challenge, access to education should be nurtured, not marginalized. It can foster the health and wellbeing of incarcerated students and contribute positively to the broader correctional community.

It is now essential that we work together to preserve and protect what we have built together so that we emerge from this moment having safeguarded our carefully constructed infrastructure for education.

In that spirit, we seek DOCCS' partnership in preserving access to higher education for incarcerated students throughout the COVID-19 crisis, with in-person instruction to be restored as soon as it is consistent with the health and safety of our communities.

It is important that we do everything we can to ensure that our incarcerated students, like their counterparts in the community, are supported in the completion of their college coursework for the current Spring 2020 semester:

- Because a transition to online instruction is not viable in the prisons, college providers are working intently to shift, temporarily and where possible, to remote delivery models in which written materials are sent to incarcerated students and assignments are returned to instructors. **We therefore request that correctional facilities provide a means of communication with the students that makes it possible for educational materials to reach the students and, in turn, be collected for return to the college.**

- Where it is not possible to advance teaching and learning at a distance consistent with academic standards, instructors have had to pause the progress of their courses. Many of these courses will remain temporarily incomplete until the resumption of in-person meetings and the completion of the course is possible. **We therefore request that educational transfer holds for all enrolled students remain in place until paused courses can again meet in person.**
- This disruption of the academic semester necessitates extra academic advising, as students must make critical decisions about withdrawing from courses and remap their paths toward degree completion. To protect their academic records and future financial aid eligibility, students must officially withdraw from courses consistent with federal Pell and college guidelines. **It is therefore essential that DOCCS provide means to facilitate academic communications between colleges and incarcerated students.**

Very little of this will be feasible if students have nowhere to work. So, we emphasize the importance of keeping school buildings open through the crisis, even as facilities may continue to move to reduced staffing.

We recognize the many challenges facing DOCCS and want to do everything that we can to establish a relatively low-maintenance system of enabling this communication between the colleges and students. One approach would temporarily allow colleges to provide students with stamped return envelopes for the submission of assignments. Alternatively, DOCCS could allow students to use their tablets for email between programs and students, or we could coordinate with a liaison at each facility for the distribution and collection of correspondence.

We request that DOCCS facilitate regular updates to the college providers in order to keep open the lines of communications between our programs and the Department during this forced hiatus. We are happy to work with the department to create an efficient system for ensuring that providers are getting the information that they need from DOCCS, and for everyone to share the innovative practices that they are employing. As a result, we could emerge from the COVID-19 crisis with even stronger relationships and educational infrastructure for moving into the future.

We thank you for the accommodations that you have already made during this time of great upheaval, and we assure you of our ongoing commitment to our partnership.

Sincerely,

Bard Prison Initiative
Max Kenner, Executive Director

Bennington College's Prison Education Initiative
Annabel Davis-Goff, Director

Cayuga Community College
Ron Cantor, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs

Columbia University's Justice-in-Education Initiative
Geraldine Downey, Director of the Center for Justice at Columbia University

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