American Democracy Project
Economic Inequality Initiative

Meeting: 12/2/2014 Main Street SUNY Cortland 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Attending: Anita Kuiken, Julia Morog, Lindy Glennon, Eric Mulvihill, Chad Underwood, Ethan Lewis, Sylvia Hahn-Berman, Derrick Pratt, Randi Storch, Brian Barrett, Sarah Hobson, Anne Wiegard, Ashley Jones, Mecke Nagel, Nancy Mazzone, Cynthia Guy, John Suarez, Richard Kendrick

Richard Kendrick gave some background on the American Democracy Project and the history of SUNY Cortland’s involvement. He followed with some details about the Economic Inequality Initiative and supplied website links to information.

The project is intended to draw the community together – faculty, staff, students, community agencies and members – and to spearhead discussion and ultimately contribute to the development of curricular modules to use in classrooms and communities, among other possibilities.

Individuals attending the meeting then went around the room stated their name, and offered their perspective on and purpose for being a part of the initiative.

The group then offered points for consideration and discussion going forward:

**Issues to review and address:**

- there is a need to educate the community as well college faculty and students; surprising how many community members are still unaware of existing local issues such as hunger or the need to earn a living wage
- address the persistent stigma associated with those less fortunate
- there is a broad range of issues that contribute to local economic inequality – lack of transportation, lack of living-wage jobs etc.
- connection between local and global inequality
- consider access to programs and resources; evaluate the rural population and their roadblocks to economic equality
- evaluate local systems such as equal access to education. There are often unintentional roadblocks
- poverty often results from lack of access to information about available aid – either just not knowing about it or it not being easily accessible – as with those in rural locations
- Cortland Community Mentors – where volunteers work with children – greatly increases that child’s chances of graduating. (Dropouts are 60% more likely to end up in prison – whereas children that are mentored are more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to stay out of trouble)
- Ban the Box – eliminate the requirement that individuals must check a box if they have been convicted of a crime – either to get a job or to even get admitted to college.
- mental health is one of our most prevalent issues locally and is often a disability - as is substance abuse and often the two go together.
- sometimes individuals have a limited ability to evaluate information that is supplied to them
financial inequality/financial literacy – you need to have funds just to be able to access the banking process – sometimes that is a deterrent to getting ahead

a need for mentoring in general for adults and families, too – to help get them out of poverty. The need for mentorship goes beyond just children.

sometimes people don’t understand the various options or benefit systems – like what the advantages would be of going back to work – or combining services etc.

there are systems in place that take advantage of the poor – such as Rent-to-Own, check cashing services and pay-day loans, predatory landlords that provide sub-standard facilities at higher rates (set up to take advantage of those in need).

nutrition – access to fresh and nutritious food; often less nutritious foods are cheaper

seniors – often have not saved enough to be in a position to pay for everything they need after retirement

Suggestions for what to do:

information gathered/solutions offered should be used to help educate law-makers, political leaders – suggested that there is a need to enter the political realm with this initiative

intersecting issues should be incorporated and addressed such as ageism and homophobia, etc. – and how often these contribute to economic inequality

look at resources available that may support the project – grants, etc. to fund research or education initiatives that come out of the project

look at and incorporate the local “Living Wage Campaign” – looking at jobs that lead to sustainability (green technology outside of the high-tech realm – like collecting table scraps/household refuse by bike for composting, etc.)

include other community organizations that are working with and addressing the issue such as Interfaith Justice – join with other common causes

consider social events in Cortland and piggyback on one (craft fair, etc.) or design our own event that promotes services and resources to community members

bring the community in more – make college more accessible to the community

hold community roundtables, sandwich seminars, etc. to interface with the community as much as possible – perhaps a year-long series that could be video-taped and shared through local TV, website, library etc.

schedule focus groups – to meet and identify local needs

any forum needs to be interactive and engaging – like the poverty simulations – people need to see the face of it – the impact of economic inequality in their own community

get the vital information out – start with what we have got and go from there

The Economic Inequality project is intended to be a multi-year project. We will continue to brainstorm and then focus in on target areas to spearhead community discussion.