Economic Inequality Initiative Meeting

June 16, 2015

Attending: Jackie Leaf-Carlton, Seven Valleys Health Coalition; Chad Underwood, Access to Independence; David Rutherford, Cornell Cooperative Extension; Billie McNabb, Cortland County Social Services; and Barbara Barton, Cyndi Guy, Randi Storch, Anne Wiegard, Sherry Tacktill, John Suarez, Julie Morog, and Sarah Hobson, all representing SUNY Cortland

The meeting was facilitated by Barb Barton. Barb invited input on the agenda and Randi Storch brought up her concern regarding the name change from the Economic Inequality Initiative to Pathways to Opportunity Initiative. She pointed out that the initiative is branded nationally and that the issue is well-identified and very visible across the political spectrum right now and that perhaps it is not a good idea to change or water down the message. Others, both who had and had not attended the last meeting where the name change was decided upon, voiced similar concerns. The name change had come from concerns about the term “economic inequality” being too political and turning off a wide range of potential participants which many agree may still be an issue. It was decided that the project/group name should be reconsidered and added to the agenda for the next meeting.

Barb asked the group about deliberative dialogues; an explanation of what they are and how the group intends to implement them. Randi Storch, having attended ADP conferences, explained that deliberative dialogues are structured dialogues that have defined topics, materials, guidelines and goals to facilitate a deliberate conversation. The dialogues are a “process” with a facilitator and trained participants; participants are trained on how to go through the process to engage in the conversation and often read assigned materials in advance.

The ADP’s Economic Inequality Initiative is developing materials to use for this purpose along with a list of specific topics of conversation regarding economic inequality and its impact on democracy. Randi explained that the intention of the dialogues is at the minimum to educate and spread awareness of the issue and engage people in the process - but also to promote understanding and help people to identify root causes of the problem and to potentially help prioritize solutions.

Sarah Hobson shared information regarding a first meeting on curricular development and shared a video produced by her and students who had conducted research regarding how economic inequality is addressed on campus. The team surveyed 132 respondents—students, staff, and faculty and the video is a sort of synopsis of the findings and is intended to be used to help generate a conversation.

The group discussed the video, many feeling that it was not focused enough on the topic of inequality. It was suggested that we needed to be more inclusive and should invite local high school students and instructors as well as other members of the community such as parents, faith leaders, and representatives from business and agriculture to participate in the discussion. It was also mentioned that curricular development needs to be more inclusive of the diverse representation of faculty on campus as there are many who themselves are dealing with economic inequality and that perhaps stipends could be offered to some of these faculty members to encourage participation.

The group felt there is a need to clarify what the curricular development entails; not only who should be involved but who ultimately the materials are intended for.
The group agreed once again that it was important that we make every effort to piggyback on other events taking place within the community to spread awareness of the issue and to garner diverse participation. The ADA celebration in July was suggested as well as upcoming election events. It would be good to try to incorporate our message into local forums and debates.

Barb Barton asked the group what our bigger vision was. It was agreed that our intention is initially to generate awareness — through deliberative dialogues and the democracy wall etc. — to nudge the community into having a conversation about economic inequality and its impact on democracy — but that our ultimate goal was to actually impact policy that would help to eliminate economic inequality.

Concerns were brought up regarding the perceived shift in focus that brought this meeting to feel more faculty and campus driven. The community representatives are more interested in a broader discussion of the issues and working toward solutions and want to ensure that there is a diverse representation of the community. David Rutherford expressed that he understood the emphasis on education and raising awareness, (particularly in relation to curricular development and work with students) but that focus does not address the kind of action his agency (Cornell Cooperative Extension) and many other community agencies are looking for. He questioned whether he or other community members could justify the time investment in participating unless we elected to identify and address some priority community issues.

The group agreed that in addition to reviewing the name change that we should have a discussion to arrive at a collective understanding of our group and its focus. What is our larger vision? It was suggested that our next meeting be for 90 minutes so we can fully address these issues.