Minutes of the Meeting of the Economic Inequality Initiative
February 4, 2015

Present: Brian Barrett; Lindy Glennon; Cyndi Guy; Sarah Hobson; Richard Kendrick; Craig Little; Derrick Pratt; Randi Storch; John Suarez; Sherry Tackett; Chad Underwood; Ann Wiegard.

Richard summarized the participation of SUNY Cortland in the Economic Inequality Initiative’s organizing workshop in Washington, D.C., January 6-9, 2015. Randi Storch and Anne Burns Thomas also represented the group, and Randi also reported on her experiences at the conference.

One of the outcomes of SUNY Cortland’s participation was the development of a grid or table for thinking about the project’s goals in two areas, Education and Action. (You can see the grid on pages 3-4 of these notes.) Within those areas of Education and Action, the grid helps us to think about how we will be addressing education in its relation to the project – understanding the issue; understanding the effects of economic inequality, and understanding the causes of economic inequality. The grid also helps us think about how we will be addressing action and whether we will be working to ameliorate the effects of inequality or to address the root causes of economic inequality.

The discussion that ensued helped to fill in the cells of the grid. The discussion is summarized below in the grid itself. In addition, we talked about four overarching issues: how we will go about promoting and framing a campus-community discussion of inequality; resources for promoting such a discussion; and the importance of NOT conflating economic inequality and poverty. Economic inequality is more than addressing poverty, and it includes addressing the issue of a shrinking middle class (and its consequences, especially for democracy) as well as understanding the “1 percent.”

What can we do to promote campus/community conversation – how can we make the campus more accessible to the community? Ideas included increasing campus-community collaboration; letting the community take more advantage of campus resources by making it easier for community members to access them (e.g., by addressing issues of parking); including church people in the project (e.g., MICAH – Moving in Congregations; Acting in Hope); reaching out to our elected officials for participation on the project, including the Mayor, Brian Tobin. [We have scheduled our upcoming meeting at a time that the Mayor can attend.]

With regards to framing the conversation, is inequality too negative an approach? Should we use something more positive, such as “Pathways to Equality” or “Pathways to Opportunity”?

What resources are available to support this project? We discussed applying for funding from entities such as the campus’ Auxiliary Services Corporation (ASC) and the Faculty Development Committee (FDC). [John Suarez completed an application for support from the FDC for our Democracy Wall idea.]
Economic inequality as a broad issue:

Excerpts from an e-mail sent by Prof. Craig Little, shared with his permission:

I take the initiative at its word: It is focused on INEQUALITY—as distinct from “poverty.” Inequality refers to gaps—and to have a “gap” one must have at least two points. It doesn’t matter whether the gap we focus on is “the 1% vs the other 99%” or the widening gap between the “top” and the “bottom” due to the shrinking middle class—but, in my view, if the initiative is about inequality, it must take two or more elements between which there is concern about a “gap(s)” into account.

This speaks to what this initiative could do that is NEW. Simply focusing on poverty and the poor is an old tune that has never played very well in America. (That isn’t to dismiss the fact that many, many people—including myself—have devoted substantial portions of their lives or careers to ameliorating the privations of poverty, etc.) There was a lot wrong with the Occupy Wall Street movement, but I think it fair to say that the repeated theme—“We are the 99 percent”—resonated more widely than most poverty-focused movements have.

I also believe that until a plurality of the 99% understand the harms to them, as part of American society, of wealth concentration at the very top (and what’s in it for them if that gap should be ameliorated), the political will to address other “gaps” like the poverty-affluent gap, won’t get much political traction.

I, therefore, believe that the biggest contribution an Inequality Initiative could make is to focus sharply on inequality with the goal of figuring out effective ways to communicate about and address this issue to citizens in a community like Cortland.

In the grid below, there is a summary of the ideas we discussed at our first two meetings for addressing Education and Action in relation to the issue of economic inequality. We will continue the brainstorming at our third meeting on March 11.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Understanding the Issue of Economic Inequality</th>
<th>Understanding Effects of Economic Inequality</th>
<th>Understanding Causes of Economic Inequality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link local to global inequality. Educate lawmakers and political leaders. Use community events as educational opportunities. Hold community roundtables; Sandwich Seminars. Organize a year-long series. Develop a course module on inequality. Bring young people's ideas into the conversation. Tie issue to upcoming elections, including local elections. Use Deliberative Polling or Deliberative Dialogues as a vehicle for education. Create a “Democracy Wall” for conversation and dialogue, including both physical and virtual aspects (e.g., a campus newspaper with a regular column; social media). Organize campus-community discussion groups in inequality. Need to plan a progressive campaign.</td>
<td>Schedule focus groups to identify local needs – need to hear the voices of the people affected. Educate about all aspects of inequality; inequality is more than poverty, as important as poverty is as an issue in our community. Educate students through involvement in the community.</td>
<td>Role of equal access to jobs; transportation; education in inequality. Address intersecting issues of homophobia, ageism, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Acting on or Ameliorating the Effects of Economic Inequality</td>
<td>Acting on or Addressing Root Causes of Economic Inequality</td>
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<td>Address stigma of poverty. Improve economic and financial literacy. Improve access to information about aid available. Mentoring children, adults, and families to help them out of poverty. Confront predatory practices by lending institutions, landlords, etc. Offer education on proper nutrition and how to get it. Send home food for kids to have on the weekend.</td>
<td>Get involved in the local Living Wage Campaign. Development sustainable, green jobs. Collaborate with other groups already working on this issue, like Interfaith Justice. Teaching skills for advocacy (like Buffalo State’s program). Include NYPIRG in the conversation. Advocate for full funding for public education and progressive tax reform. Hold panels for groups to discuss ways in which they are taking action. Need to think about sustaining a movement for the long term.</td>
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