

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
Board of Trustees and Leadership Council
Study Session
Strategies for Addressing the Impact of Poverty on Our Students
January 26, 2016

Convene and Introduction

Board Chair Michael Vekich and Chancellor Steven Rosenstone convened a joint study session of the Board of Trustees and the Leadership Council on January 26, 2016, at 10:00 am at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. The session was on strategies for addressing the impact of poverty on our students.

Chair Vekich explained that this is the first of what will be several sessions this year to better understand the needs of our students and how our colleges and universities can do a better job of serving our students. At last month's Academic and Student Affairs Committee meeting, we learned of some of the consequences of the Great Recession:

- Fully 36% of our students (92,000) are Pell-eligible – meaning that over 1/3 of our students come from families of very modest financial means. This compares to 23% a decade ago.
- Fully 62% of our students receive some form of financial aid – up about 10 points over the past decade.

Students with high financial need are less likely to successfully complete their degrees than those with little or no financial need:

- students with high financial need are about 14% less likely than those with no financial need to achieve their associate's degree within 3 years of beginning their program;
- they are about 8% less likely to achieve their baccalaureate degree within 6 years of beginning their program.

Questions for us to consider are:

- How hospitable are our campuses to students living in poverty, who are homeless and/or hungry and are struggling to hold body and soul together while pursuing their education?
- How do we better understand the struggles of students in poverty?
- What do our colleges and universities look like from their point of view?
- What do we need to change to do a better job?

Introduction of Dr. Donna Beegle

Chancellor Rosenstone introduced Dr. Donna Beegle. Her life work has focused on these kinds of questions – questions we need to address if we are going to “break the iron cage of poverty,” as she puts it.

Dr. Beegle is author of several books, including *An Action Approach to Educating Students who Live in the Crisis of Poverty*, and has worked nationally with educators, social service agencies and other organizations who strive to make a difference for people living in the crisis of poverty. Donna grew up in poverty and struggled with poverty through a good part of her life. In her mid-20s she started down a path that began with completion of her G.E.D., then an A.A. in journalism, a B.A. and Masters in Communication, and eventually a doctorate in Educational Leadership. In 1989 she co-founded Communication Across Barriers, serves as its president, and in 2014 was named a Woodrow Wilson Princeton Fellow.

Her life's work and passion are to help people who are trapped in poverty. In Donna's words, "This can only happen if the voices of those struggling with poverty can be heard and their perspectives understood."

That's our purpose today: to better understand the voices of those struggling with poverty and to better understand how we should reshape our colleges and universities to meet the needs of students who are struggling to "break the iron cage of poverty."

Dr. Donna Beegle acknowledged everyone and commented that she currently resides in Portland, Oregon. She is originally from Phoenix, Arizona and she grew up in a family that came from generations of poverty.

Dr. Beegle commented that a student in poverty today is less likely to achieve an education than a student in poverty in the 1940s. Only 11 percent of students from poverty complete their degrees or certifications. What prevents us from addressing poverty? There is no clear definition of poverty. We graduate people from college without Poverty 101 and leave media as #1 teacher. We are segregated by social class and confounding by race and poverty issues. The voices and perspectives of students from poverty are rarely included in the development of solutions. The fragmented approaches to dealing with issues of poverty do not allow us to learn from them.

Dr. Beegle introduced Michele Jersak, a counselor from Century College. Ms. Jersak shared her views on poverty and its effect on students in Minnesota, those originally from Minnesota as well as those coming to Minnesota to attend college. She introduced a short recorded presentation with actual students sharing their personal journeys through poverty and college.

Dr. Beegle explained that there are different views of poverty including that it is caused by individual or family irresponsibility. The policy response is to punish people and then they will be more responsible and not poor. Poor people do not learn middle class values. The policy response has been to teach people to be more middle class. Poverty caused by race, class or gender barriers to education, housing, employment, health care, etc., are addressed as single-focused efforts. Poverty is complex and breaking its cycle requires a systematic, connected, and collaborative approach.

Guiding questions include: What are we taught to believe about poverty? How do the different life experiences of poverty impact educational opportunities? What are three practical tools leaders can use right now to improve outcomes? What proven next steps can leaders begin to create poverty competencies and improve outcomes?

What does poverty teach? Constant Crisis: People are sick more and in survival mode. Two strategies: 1. Examine policies/practices to ensure they are serving students/families in the crisis of poverty. 2. Make it a priority to know about local resources and opportunities for breaking poverty barriers.

Work to understand and build in supports for students who live in the war zone of poverty.

Poverty Impacts: Hopelessness. Purpose of education or job unclear. Not knowing subjects/norms/vocabulary. Stereotypes, myths, and judgements. Internalized personal deficiency. Poverty realities pull and demand attention. Trained incapacity: expectations diminished by poverty conditions.

Advanced tools for improving education outcomes:

1. Strengths perspective – potential is unknown. Raise expectations and provide network of supports.
2. Resiliency Theory – promote a focus on what students are doing right.
3. Asset Theory – build access to resources and supports.
4. Social capital theory – break isolation! Encourage programs to connect students in poverty with mentors/navigators who use their education to earn a living.
5. Comprehensive, poverty informed connected approaches to removing poverty obstacles.

What can leaders do? Promote a poverty informed climate. Ensure poverty competencies: a deeper understanding of poverty and its impacts are essential for breaking barriers. Examine policies and curriculum to ensure we are actually serving, not punishing or ignoring, the realities of poverty that students and families face. Build staff “resource backpacks” to decrease poverty impacts on learning.

A new paradigm. A deeper understanding of poverty and families who live in it. A strength’s perspective approach: Stand in awe. A NASA Attitude: Failure is not an option. Stronger Partnerships: within and without.

There is enough money to address issues of poverty. For example, Americans spent millions of dollars on Valentine’s Day 2015.

Dr. Beegle outlined three essential tools for leaders:

1. **Conceptual:** Ensure poverty competencies, be poverty informed. The Beegle Poverty Institute and Beegle Certified Poverty Coaching Institute can provide competency assessments, action plans, and kits for students.
2. **Dialectical:** Examine leadership decisions from the perspectives of students and families. Build identification, develop trust, and improve communication.
3. **Connected Approach:** The opportunity community model exists because you cannot break the cycle of poverty alone. A poverty informed community builds support for educators and restores hope for those students in poverty and for those who are serving them. It removes the shame and judgment and reduces the isolation of poverty by connecting students and parents to people who can help them navigate barriers to success.

Dr. Beegle concluded by stating that leaders should lead through their actions. People are resilient. Every student's potential is unknown and with your help and connected approach you can find ways to help students shine.

Chair Vekich thanked Dr. Beegle for an information session. He also thanked the Leadership Council for their participation.

The Study Session adjourned at 12:05 p.m.