Poverty Discussion Group

In September 2014, the Vann Center began organizing a discussion group on poverty comprised of several Davidson College faculty and staff, initially to enable us to learn from one another’s richly diverse expertise and experiences. The potential outcomes from this group’s discussions might include compiling recommended resources, enhancing existing courses, developing new courses, convening public forums, collaborating on op-ed or scholarly journal articles, creating and enhancing relationships with community partners, and advocating changes in public policy.

This is by no means the first focus on poverty at Davidson College: the problem of economic poverty has long been addressed in courses across multiple departments, in co-curricular civic engagement projects, in voluntary community service efforts, and countless other initiatives.

The following rough definition of poverty is offered as a starting point: To be in poverty is to lack sufficient income or economic assets either for oneself or one’s dependents to afford 1) reliable shelter from the elements, 2) adequate food to stave off hunger or malnutrition, and/or 3) healthcare to prevent debilitating illnesses and disabilities or alleviate their symptoms.

Poverty no doubt has myriad causes, including regional, national or global economic downturns, dislocations in particular industries and urban areas, natural disasters like drought, floods and earthquakes, discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, and armed conflicts that can terrorize workers, destroy farms and factories and homes, and force people to become refugees. Poverty in some cases may well be the result of individual choices, too.

We should also keep in mind that communities experiencing temporary, chronic or persistent economic poverty are not necessarily impoverished in other ways. In other words, people who are economically poor are often rich in art, music, dance, storytelling, religious ritual, humor, family and friendship.

Here are some illustrative questions that might be pursued by this working group:

What are the main factors that cause people to fall into poverty?

For those who remain impoverished for long periods of time, what factors keep them there?

How significant is discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender etc. in causing or perpetuating poverty?

How do individuals and families escape poverty?

What kinds of private and public efforts/policies best enable that?
Which policies intended to alleviate poverty tend in practice not to work?

Where do tradeoffs emerge between raising wages, reducing unemployment, limiting inflation etc.?

Is poverty in itself an indication of injustice?

What is morally owed to the poor by those of us who have more than we need?

The current discussion group of Davidson faculty and staff (with their departmental affiliations) includes:

- Dan Aldridge (History)
- Mari Armstrong-Hough (Medical Humanities and Sociology)
- Dylan Fitz (Economics)
- Kristie Foley (Medical Humanities)
- Shyam Gouri Suresh (Economics)
- Andy Lustig (Religion)
- Dave Martin (Economics)
- Sean McKeever (Philosophy)
- Ken Menkhaus (Political Science)
- Doug Ottati (Religion)
- David Perry (Vann Center for Ethics)
- Stacey Riemer (Center for Civic Engagement)
- Susan Roberts (Political Science)
- Clark Ross (Economics)
- Matt Samson (Anthropology)
- Fred Smith (Economics)
- Rob Spach (Chaplain)
- Alica Sparling (Economics)
- Sara Swanson (Library)
- Alice Wiemers (History)

Note that the views of those individuals should not be construed necessarily to reflect my own.

We very much hope to draw upon interested students and outside experts as we move forward.

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