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Welfare Reform: An Opportunity to Engage Universities in Community and Economic Development

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With the passage of the most radical federal social policy in sixty years, the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996" and the related Agricultural Appropriations Act, a window of opportunity opened for focusing on the well-being of children, youth and families — the fundamental unit of a community and the economy.

An intent of the legislation was to move decision making to state and local levels. This "devolution" of decision making opened the opportunity for local citizens and decision makers to engage in shaping public policy to determine, together, what's needed and desired in communities. This further presented the possibility of attending to the universal needs of all people to live well (Hass and Nachtigal 1997).

The Link between Universities and Welfare Reform

For universities and colleges with a mission of both discovery of knowledge and its application, welfare reform presents a challenge to faculty and students to engage in important public work so that state and local decision making can both incorporate the findings as appropriate to localities and inform the research agenda of the university.

Welfare reform presents an opportunity for universities to reestablish themselves as relevant to the needs of society. For most of this decade, speakers and writers have called for a "revival of relevancy." Lerner, Miller and Ostrom noted that "public research universities are being asked to address pressing societal problems." The "call [is] for universities to be accountable for helping address, in a sustained manner, the social and cultural problems of the proximal and distal communities in which they are embedded" (1995, 14). The call for response, and the compelling issue of welfare reform, provide a clear imperative for mobilizing the resources of our colleges and universities.

Welfare reform provides an opportunity "scholarship of engagement." As Boyer said, "The academy must become a more

vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must affirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement" (1996 13).

For faculty and students, engagement in welfare reform means conducting research to monitor changes. It means measuring the impact of welfare reform on all members of a community — the families moving off welfare rolls, at-risk residents needing public assistance, businesses challenged with providing living-wage jobs, government agencies struggling to change how they've handled human services, and non-profit organizations seeking to provide supplements to government programs and residents who earn low or no wages.

Engagement means extending the expertise of our faculty and students to citizens and decision makers as they make state and local decisions in response to federal legislation and to the congressional and executive branches of the federal government as they revisit welfare-reform policy in the months and years to come. It means being involved as family and community needs increasingly seem to have few or clear solutions. It means becoming involved in important public work that affects the fiber of the nation.

Engagement means making the university relevant through outreach. Outreach, as scholarship that integrates the discovery and application of knowledge from multiple disciplines, can be an effective means of connecting the university to the community and in turn generating financial and political support for the university.

The Link between Community and Economic Development

Welfare reform involves economic and community development as well as human and family development. Economies thrive or stagnate within the context of the local community — even as those communities are affected by the global economy. Communities' workers and taxpayers, as well as consumers of goods and services, originate with families. One goal of welfare reform is for people to be self-sufficient and personally responsible. Fostering the development of responsibility, and providing the human capital needed to be relatively self-sufficient, are key functions of families.

Within the family economy, children learn the basic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies to live, love, learn, and work — the human capital that in turn contributes to communities when children become the employees of business, entrepreneurs and taxpayers. Recent research on cognitive development emphasizes the importance of the family in the first three years of life to the human-capital development of individuals (Tufts University School of Nutrition 1995). If children can't learn, they can't earn. If they can't earn, they can't become productive, self-sufficient adults.

Families, the first sociological unit in which a person lives, are also responsible for the initial development of social capital. Social capital is the ability of people to live and work together in ways that contribute to social cohesion. For welfare reform to

succeed, people must possess both the human and social capital needed to survive and thrive in the workplace. Human and social capital, when linked with environmental and financial capital, form "community capital"—the substance of any economy (Flora 1995).

In order to develop effective, wise policy, welfare reformers need to understand the linkage of families to economic and community development. Wise policy addresses not only the needs of the few moving off welfare but also the well-being of the many. Wise policy deals with not only the immediate but also the long-term aspects of becoming and remaining relatively self-sufficient. It is policy based on appropriate research combined with wisdom of citizens.

Such understanding can be gained when communities and universities collaborate. Speaking to attendees at an annual meeting of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, the president of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation emphasized this approach to social issues: "Higher education can add value by . . . building partnerships with constituents — businesses and communities to create opportunities for learning, economic growth and community development that didn't exist before" (Richardson 1996).

Universities can contribute to welfare reform through their scholarship of discovery and application of knowledge. The body of knowledge residing in family social science and related disciplines is clearly relevant to public policy, as decision makers seek to support individuals moving off welfare and to prevent others from moving onto public assistance. Research supports the need for high-quality child care for workers, and for parenting, nutrition, and financial-management education. That knowledge base can be applied as businesses, legislatures, county commissioners, and agencies decide how to support individuals moving off welfare into the work force. In turn, faculty and students working in partnership with communities can enrich their research agenda and the education they offer through outreach.

Universities can further contribute through their scholarship of K-12 schooling, assisting school-to-work initiatives as communities strive to graduate youths who have the ability to obtain gainful employment and maintain their self-sufficiency. The academic community can support people seeking to build their human capital through higher education. Continuing education can fill the need for additional education to build capacity among professionals engaged in welfare reform; undergraduate and graduate educators can serve people moving off welfare. In FY96, 4.4 million families participated in the existing welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Nearly half of those families had high school diplomas and may be eligible to attend college — a significant pool for colleges and universities (One Dupont Welfare Reform Coalition 1997). Faculty can also incorporate concepts related to welfare reform into the academic studies and internships of degree-seeking students.

Universities can provide public forums where a wide range of opinions, beliefs, and data can be explored. Academia can

disseminate research-based information via printed and electronic media and provide on-site and distance education to assist the public in responding knowledgeably to welfare reform. This kind of scholarship of engagement can create "a special climate in which academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other helping to enlarge . . . the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us" (Boyer 1996).

Though faculty and students tend to be focused on disciplines, compelling public issues like welfare reform require integration of knowledge — an interdisciplinary approach. By engaging faculty and students from multiple disciplines, the university can help decision makers in business, agencies, and organizations, *and* citizens understand the need for a holistic approach to socioeconomic dilemmas posed by issues that arise from welfare reform. It is such an integrated approach that Boyer believes is required to adequately attend to the challenges presented by complex issues affecting society today and into the future (1996).

The Link between Universities and Society

The challenge to institutions of higher education is to bring our considerable capacities to bear on compelling societal issues. At issue, however, is our commitment to connecting the expertise of our institutions with the public's need for research-based knowledge. Welfare reform provides an opportunity to renew our relevancy, through scholarship of engagement, by helping society to respond knowledgeably not just for the welfare of the few but the well-being of all.

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