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Opinion

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EDITORIAL

A way out of poverty

A University of Mississippi public policy assistant professor who hopes to make a documentary film about how poverty affects education discovered something interesting during his research.

As the professor, Eric Weber, explained it to *The Oxford Eagle*, many low-income students who have succeeded in higher education told him stories of adults — including teachers and guidance counselors — who warned them that they would fail if they tried to attend college. Generally, the adults predicted “they would fail, come home with their tails between their legs, and drown in debt,” Weber said.

The professor said both black and white low-income students reported this sort of negative reaction, so it appears to be more of a class issue than a racial issue.

Fortunately, the professor knew which question to ask next: How did you overcome this type of discouragement?

The repeated answer is that the students knew someone from a similar background who had succeeded in college and in life, despite the warnings of others. That gave them the confidence to pursue their dream and the willingness to stick to their goals when times got tough.

Weber's working theory — backed by plenty of examples over the decades — is that the state needs to address a deeper cultural problem that leads to low educational expectations and poverty. Without saying so directly, what he surely means is that some people tend to have a deep suspicion of anyone successful — and resent anybody trying to climb a few rungs of America's economic ladder.

What a shortsighted attitude. What's even more distressing are the anecdotes the professor reported — that some school officials warned low-income students of the pitfalls of a college education.

College certainly can be intimidating, especially to someone whose family and friends have little or no experience with higher education. And it certainly can be expensive, especially for anyone who attends a university rather than a community college.

But there are all sorts of grants available to help people avoid building up excessive debt through education. Further, many people worked their way through college as a means of paying for it.

Which is really the whole point: Something that valuable is worth working hard for. This lesson has failed to resonate with too many Mississippians, and it's time that changed.

To combat this, Weber wants his documentary to profile Mississippians who, despite the warnings of their peers, chose to further their education and succeeded.

Meanwhile, everyone would serve the state well if they encouraged young people, especially those from a low-income or otherwise challenging background, to look around and see what a lack of interest in education and job training has done for Mississippi.

The honest answer is, not a whole lot. We've got to get the message across: The only way out is up.

An Ole Miss professor found that many low-income students were warned against attending college.