

UPDATE: UM prof says examples help lift students from poverty

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OXFORD — Telling people Mississippi is poor and needs to improve its educational system is one thing. Eric Weber, a professor at the University of Mississippi, hopes to show them.

For instance, students coming from impoverished backgrounds often have a better chance at succeeding during their college careers if they see examples of peers who have done well once they entered higher education.

That's one of the theories Weber hopes to incorporate into his multi-pronged effort to improve the state of the state's educational system and, consequently, help lift more people out of poverty.

Weber, an assistant professor of public policy leadership at Ole Miss, moved to the state in July 2007 after obtaining his Ph.D. at Southern Illinois University. He teaches courses such as critical thinking, communication, public policy, and ethics and public policy.

His first book, "Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism," will be released in October. His second book, "Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy," will be released in 2011.

"My aim in the next few years is to translate and apply the technical lessons I have studied and learned in my scholarship to the public, practical problems that people deal with outside the university — in real life," Weber said.

"When I came to Mississippi with my interests in politics, ethics and education, the problems of education here profoundly inspired me to study them closely."

Weber plans to film a documentary on how poverty inhibits educational attainment.

"There is an apparent Catch-22 there," he said. "How can we fix education without addressing poverty? But how can we address poverty without fixing education?"

Weber will seek funding for the film, which is in the early stages of development. He's looking for people knowledgeable about these topics to interview for the film.

In his research, Weber found that most students who succeed were discouraged by guidance counselors and teachers from even trying to attend college.

"I have a number of poor or African-American students who are succeeding wonderfully here along side more affluent students," Weber said. "When I talked with

them at one point, they described to me their experience with guidance counselors and teachers. They were told that if they attended the University of Mississippi they would fail, come home with their tails between their legs, and drown in debt."

Weber notes that the issue is not always racially motivated. One of his students, a white male with modest income, has seen similar struggles because of family and friends choosing not to attend school. The struggle is a class issue and one that some students continue to overcome.

"When I learned of my students' discouragements, I asked them how they managed to overcome them. Their answer was that they knew an example or two who succeeded," Weber said. "Poverty is quite clearly shown to be consistent with low educational attainment and Gov. (Haley) Barbour has noted the fact rightly that education is the No. 1 economic development issue in the state.

"The hypothesis I would like to test in the project is that behind educational failure and poverty in this state rests a deeper cultural problem that must be addressed. This brings me to the point of making a documentary. My idea for a cultural weapon is simple: examples."

Weber said he'd like to show what kinds of cultural forces are at work against and in support of student achievement. In interviewing people for the documentary, Weber intends to meet those still in school, drop outs, graduates, teachers and guidance counselors.

"I think that a video could be a tangible way of seeing the cultural forces at work that we may find would be best to alter, possibly to great effect," Weber said.

With this documentary, Weber wants to show the examples and role models that helped students to take a chance on pursuing higher education despite many telling them they would not succeed. He also plans to work in collaboration with scholars who study background and cultural influences on children and young adults who live in poverty and fail in education.

The project is a three-step, three-year intensive study that will result in a documentary.

The first step is bringing scholars from others institutions to work with him to study the cultural forces that inspire self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. The second step will be to address how those living in poverty are unable to envision positive futures. The third will be focus on the positive ways that have led to success.