



June 21, 2010

Young people need encouraging words

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. ...

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.

- Enterprise-Journal, McComb
