

2013 Program Theme

A young man arrived in the United States and moved with his family to one of the poorest sections of Los Angeles. The violence and poverty that surrounded him was a surprise. In his application for a scholarship to Stanford University he wrote, "I thought America was a land of riches and pleasures because of what had seen in the movies. It proved to be the opposite." At the end of the essay this high school junior returned to his theme of selfhood:

Poverty has not stopped me. I want to change the world. Not only do I want to see a decrease in violence, but I also want to learn as much as I can so that I can help others. In order for me to succeed, I will not have the benefits of rich kids who go to good schools and have private tutors. I only have one weapon: a desire to learn. I work very hard; I study every night and on the weekend. I am determined to improve the world by showing that there are people who are willing to make a difference and willing to be an example for others. America is not a land of riches for those of us who live in [my neighborhood], but it can be a land of opportunities for everyone: success is up to me.

This young man's story highlights a central theme of the conference: Education has long been seen as a way out of poverty, in the U.S. and globally. To be sure, some will suggest that education plays no role or that education systems mask inequality and perpetuate cycles of poverty and wealth. Another interpretation is that meritocracy works – those who work hard will succeed. Others may suggest that the student's essay speaks to the resilience of the individual in spite of inequitable schooling structures. Still others will read his comment as a call for alternative forms of educational opportunity insofar as public schools have failed. Critics will see the failure of schools to move groups out of poverty and point to his success as singular rather than representative. Some will point out that an elite private university gets portrayed as heroic whereas such institutions are actually part of the problem; by restricting access to social capital they maintain their position, fortify an increasingly anxious upper middle class, and make his experience unique rather than typical for the poor. Observers of global education might note that education is used as public policy by governments democratic and authoritarian in efforts to control, reduce, and manage poverty. And of course, some will say that a single story tells us nothing and what is really needed is a large-scale study to determine the underlying problems.

The purpose of the 2013 meeting is not to require a doctrinaire adherence to one or another viewpoint. Rather, the intent is to have us come together as an academic community to discuss, debate, and consider the relationships of education and poverty.

We conceive of poverty broadly. Poverty exists not only through the lack of material goods; an intellectual poverty can also pervade educational organizations and society. In *The Idea of a University*, over 150 years ago, John Henry Newman wrote, "Knowledge is something more than a passive reception of scraps and details." Newman called for intellectuals to be in intense engagement with one another, with students, and with society so that we might better understand the flaws of one another's argument. Through this engagement Newman believed that a better world might be created. To that end, we are particularly interested in designing a conference where individuals do not cordon themselves off from those with whom they disagree, and instead hope to create conditions for difficult dialogues.

AND POVERTY