

# Structured Support Moves Women from Poverty to Success

“Three powerful forces are converging on our nation: divergent skill distributions, the changing economy and demographic trends,” said **Barbara Duncanson**, the former executive director of administration at Indiana’s Ivy Tech Community College’s South Bend campus. “If we don’t get a handle on these, we’re in trouble as a nation.”

Her position being eliminated at the end of 2010 is an example of the second force, a changing economy.

Educators and researchers are learning that poverty is a more important marker of the probability of student success than race or gender. This translates into a double hit for poor white women and a triple hit for poor women of color.

It’s women who are more likely to be poor. According to the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank, in 2007 poverty affected 13.8% of females compared to 11.1% of males, with women being poorer than men across all racial and ethnic groups.

The National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan found the poverty rate in households headed by single women to be 29.9%, more than double the overall poverty rate of 14.3%.

While education is seen as a pathway out of poverty, earning a degree doesn’t always bring success. Fitting in and being able to navigate the middle class world of higher education and the workplace actually contribute more to success than does the actual amount of income.

Programs that address the characteristics of economic class can improve the success rate for low-income, first generation students of any age. Ivy Tech is one of nine schools applying the Bridges Out of Poverty program or the program’s Getting Ahead initiative, both created by Dr. Ruby K. Payne and Philip DeVol.

At the University of Nebraska’s conference on Women in Educational Leadership held in Lincoln in October 2010, Duncanson explained how Ivy Tech has used the Getting Ahead initiative, by partnering with St. Joseph County’s Bridges program.

## Bridges Out of Poverty program

Ivy Tech’s three North Central campuses—in Goshen, Warsaw and South Bend—are part of the 23-campus, 200,000 student system. The demographics of the North Central campuses, particularly South Bend, make Payne and DeVol’s work a natural fit.

Due to a significant decline in manufacturing, the poverty rate in St. Joseph County is higher than in the rest of the state and the nation. Some 70% of the students receive financial aid.

Created in the 1990s by Payne, the Bridges program aims to remove barriers to success by addressing the economic class differences among people and groups. Based on a book by the same name authored by Payne, DeVol and Terie Dreussi-Smith, *Bridges Out of Poverty* (AHA Process 2000) helps employers, community organizations, social



**Barbara Duncanson**

service agencies and individuals confront poverty in a comprehensive way.

As a community change model, the Bridges program works with four areas that touch people in poverty: individual behavior, human and social capital, exploitation and economic/political structures. The program’s goal is to eliminate obstacles to moving from poverty to self-sufficiency, based on 10 constructs.

- The primary construct involves using the lens of economic class to understand and take responsibility for a person’s own societal experiences while being open to the experience of others.

- Construct two examines where gender, race, physical disability and other social disparities intersect with poverty. This intersection is the primary place to address inequalities in accessing resources.

- While most people view poverty solely as an economic event, construct three looks at the extent to which a person, institution or community does without resources. For women, this lack of resources isn’t only financial. It also can mean having no support system or mentor, encountering hidden rules or an emotional inability to handle challenges.

- Construct four agrees to build relationships of mutual respect. Facilitators and participants learn and use the hidden rules of class to improve relationships and program design. Participants are seen as “experts” and advise on how the program works.

- The basis for construct five is that people in poverty are problem solvers who need to be at the table.

- Construct six underscores that plans to move out of poverty should be based on accurate mental models of poverty, middle class and wealth.

- Construct seven seeks to address all causes of poverty. It identifies students’ relationships and explores how they may be holding them back.

- Stabilizing the environment, removing barriers to transition and building resources are key to construct eight.

- Construct nine builds long-term support for transition, whether the support is individual, institutional or community/policy.

- Building a sustainable community where everyone can live well is the construct ten’s objective.

## Economic class obstacles

For low-income students, economic class creates more obstacles than does their actual lack of money. Class can be divided into three levels: poverty, middle and wealth. Each comes with its own mental models.

A mental model is an internal picture of how the world works. It usually exists below our awareness and determines how we act. It can either help us or lead us astray.

“We all have certain mental models about how we interact with people in poverty,” said Duncanson. “For dialog to occur, we must suspend our own mental models.”

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Helping students in poverty means taking them where they're coming from. Don't automatically assume that those leaving your classroom early or arriving late are lazy or uncaring. They may have other responsibilities.

*People in poverty focus on the present.* They make decisions based on their feelings at the moment or survival. Priorities are survival, relationships and entertainment.

*The middle class focuses on the future.* Work and achievement are its hallmarks. Decisions are based on the contributions to future success.

*The wealthy consider traditions and history* to be important, along with decorum. Financial, political and social connections are priorities.

Those who want to move out of poverty must be willing to learn and follow the hidden rules of those in the middle and upper classes. Doing so can lead to better jobs, additional relationships and other resources that can help them to succeed.

### Getting Ahead initiative

In an effort to improve retention and completion, the school revamped its strategic plan to add initiatives that would help faculty, staff and students understand the hurdles that people in poverty faced. One initiative was Getting Ahead, which the school launched in 2007 with grant funds from St. Joseph County's Bridges program.

How did Ivy Tech get involved in the Bridges program and the Getting Ahead initiative? In fall 1996, the South Bend campus invited DeVol to present the Bridges program and its concept to all faculty and staff.

Many followed up the presentation with additional training. An internal trainer continues to work with new faculty and staff.

One of the goals of Getting Ahead is to encourage students to "suspend" their mental models as well as the mental models of those in different economic classes. This allows them to make conscious choices about what to change about themselves, their environment and their current situations. It also gives them the power to determine if they want to change.

Focusing on the 11 key resources needed to "live well," Getting Ahead features socioeconomic class analysis, self-reflection and group support. The 11 resources are: financial, emotional, mental, formal register, spiritual, integrity and trust, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, motivation and persistence and the knowledge of hidden rules.

Formal register is defined as "having the vocabulary, language ability and negotiation skills to succeed in work and/or school environments." It doesn't mention anything about financial poverty.

According to Payne, a person may have an income significantly above the poverty level, but still be considered impoverished in other key resource areas, especially in mental models and the hidden rules of class. Unless those are addressed, achieving success is difficult.

The school has offered one class each semester through spring 2010, reaching 57 participants: 31 were Ivy Tech students and the rest were community members or college

employees. In 2010 South Bend added a second class and Goshen and Warsaw started the class.

All classes were offered as personal enrichment courses for CEUs through the school's department of workforce and economic development. After recruiting its first students through a flyer distributed across campus and in a low-income housing development, the class has had a waiting list.

St. Joseph County's Bridges program covered about 60% of the cost to run the first six Getting Ahead classes at Ivy Tech. The program has been the "lifeblood of the Ivy Tech program and our key partner," said Duncanson. In 2010 the school began funding the classes from operational funds.

The county offers many supports for Getting Ahead graduates. It holds monthly networking meetings where graduates can meet with "allies," middle and upper class people who are willing to provide their skills and knowledge of middle class rules.

It also provides financial management classes partnering with area banks to help graduates learn to manage money and use financial systems and instruments. Those completing the program receive a micro loan to help them build credit.

In the first six Getting Ahead classes, women were 90% of the participants and African Americans were 70%.

### Does it work?

Of the 31 Ivy Tech students in the group of 57, 32% improved their GPAs after completing Getting Ahead, 46% are on track to complete their degree in less than three years and two have graduated. Several community program participants have enrolled in school.

Getting Ahead helped Robin, an adult student who's married with children and an Ivy Tech employee, to graduate with an associate's degree in accounting. "She credits her fellow participants as a support group for her," said Duncanson. "They helped her get over the stigma of being an older student."

Kathy, a former resident of Chicago with a history of poverty and drugs, was initially leery of participating in Getting Ahead. "She didn't realize she was poor until she was in the program," Duncanson said. While earning a degree in human services, Kathy learned strategies to help others and now is an Ameri-Corps

volunteer.

Duncanson noted that some students who came into the program were originally middle class. After hitting poverty due to a job loss or other situation, they relied on those who had been poor for a long time for strategies to cope with their newfound poverty.

Today's economic turmoil means schools are educating more students from the lower socioeconomic classes. Both the Bridges program and Getting Ahead provide a way to challenge the perceptions of those who are poor and give them a new mental model to move out of poverty. ■

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