I will begin with two claims for which we have sufficient certitude to call them facts: First, the United States is the most impoverished developed nation on this planet. Second, undergraduate and professional education in the United States offers minimal attention to sustained curricula for addressing U.S. poverty. I wish to draw your attention to this peculiar juxtaposition.

I

Since Mollie Orshansky, a member of the Social Security Administration, developed a standard method for measuring the rate of poverty in the U.S. during the mid-sixties, this nation has made scant progress in reducing poverty. The sixties saw progress. The U.S. poverty rate, based on Orshansky’s method, plummeted from over 22 percent in 1959 to 11.1 percent in 1973. This official poverty was 15 percent in 2012 and 14.5 percent in 2013. The U.S. poverty rate has vacillated during the past forty years, but never again dipped below 11.3 percent.1 Orshansky’s method for measuring has recently come under withering criticism, prompting the U.S. Census Bureau to issue an alternative Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) for past four years.2 The criticism is warranted due to changing circumstances, but, as Rebecca Blank, a principal proponent of the SPM, has noted, the official measurement still offers a generally accurate

---

account of our overall lack of progress in diminishing poverty. Overall U.S. poverty has disappointedly persisted for forty years.3

This persistence has prompted some critics of government anti-poverty efforts to echo President Ronald Regan’s well-worn comment: We fought a war on poverty, and poverty won. The implication is clear: Poverty is stubbornly intractable, at least unresponsive to public policies initiatives. Persistent, however, should not be confused with intractable and unchanging. The SPM demonstrates that programs like Food Stamps (SNAP) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (ETIC) for working adults (mostly for those with children) significantly reduce poverty in extremely poor households and in households with children. While the Supplementary Poverty rate remains high—at 15.5 percent for 2013—the trend has been toward fewer persons below the poverty line, and this measure shows that some government programs have been effective without discouraging employment.4 The SPM especially exposes the devastating effects of medical expenses for low-income households. The data regarding the potential for better health insurance coverage to reduce income poverty are particularly revealing because the official poverty measurement ignores in-kind assistance and unavoidable and unpredictable family medical expenses. Consequently, it does not consider how public health insurance subsidies increase the disposable income of poor households or how unavoidable medical expenses can devastate the household budget of low-income families.

We should not assume no progress in reducing aspects of U.S. poverty. Nor should we conclude that persistent poverty in the U.S. entails similarly recalcitrant poverty in all developed

nations. We have long known that poverty rates in the U.S. are much higher than those in other
developed nations using what is called the relative poverty line—usually calculated at 50-60
percent of a nation’s median income. A recently published article by Timothy Smeeding, an
expert on comparative international poverty rates, shows that the U.S. ranks next to last, just
ahead of Israel, among 28 “rich” nations for which he has data. At an 18 percent poverty rate
according to this measure, the U.S. ranks behind Poland, Estonia, South Korea, and even Russia,
a “moderate-income-nation.” You might correctly surmise that measurements relative to median
income do not indicate the real purchasing power of the 18 percent in the U.S. compared to the
13 percent below the poverty line in Estonia. However, Smeeding also considers real income
thresholds anchored in 1994. He uses data from the Luxembourg Income Study to reveal this
real income poverty in 2011, comparing the U.S. to twelve other countries. Although lower than
the 18 percent poverty rate relative to median income, U.S. poverty measured by an unchanging
poverty threshold since 1994 remains at 14.5 percent. Among the twelve nations in this study,
only Mexico’s poverty rate exceeds 14.5 percent. The Czech Republic has the lowest poverty
rate on this measure at 5 percent. The study does not include the Scandinavian countries.\footnote{5}

Other measures of low income also show that the United States has the highest, or nearly
the highest, income poverty rate among developed nations. A 2012 report by the Economic
Policy Institute reveals that late in last decade the earnings of U.S. wage earners at the tenth
percentile received less than 50 percent of median income earnings, the lowest percentage of the
twenty-one largely OECD nations examined. The purchasing power of these U.S. low income
workers was less than similarly situated workers in eleven of these twenty-one countries and
virtually equal to workers in Canada, Japan, and New Zealand. Only low-income workers in

\footnote{5 Timothy Smeeding, “Poverty Measurement” in The Oxford Handbook of Poverty and Society, eds. D. Brady and
L. Burton (Oxford: Oxford University Press: Forthcoming.}
Italy, Spain, France, and Greece had less purchasing power. Moreover, if we examine the child poverty rate, a harbinger of lack of opportunity, the statistics are more alarming. The United Nations Children’s Fund calculation of relative-income poverty rates based on 2009 data ranked the U.S. thirty-fourth of thirty-five nations, between Latvia and Romania.

Non-income measures of poverty reveal reinforce the data on income poverty in the U.S. The infant mortality rate in the United States for 2014, estimated in the CIA Factbook, is 6.17 per 1,000 births, higher than Serbia and 54 other countries on the list, including nearly all of the highly developed countries. The maternal death rate, at 21 per 100,000 in 2010, was higher than Iran and 47 other nations. Studies of low-birth weight show similar comparative problems with the health of U.S. infants and mothers at birth, and these health problems at birth are disproportionately among African Americans. Even absent direct evidence, we can be relatively certain that the poor showing of the U.S. in these comparative health measures results from the class and racial gaps in the provision for healthcare and public health.

Comparisons among nations of educational deprivation, in contrast to aggregate comparisons, are difficult. Nevertheless, Sean Reardon from Stanford has discovered an increasing educational achievement gap in math and reading in the U.S. between those at ninetieth and those at the tenth income percentiles. The gap seems to have been widening substantially, as much as fifty percent, during the past fifty years—most of it in the past twenty-five years. The gap between income groups has increased while the racial achievement gap, still

---

significant, has decreased. What’s more, the children coming to kindergarten exhibit this gap. It persists, but does not grow, during the elementary and secondary school years. Whether or not similar class and racial gaps exist in other nations, we know that the class gap in educational achievement and attainment in the U.S. has grown.\textsuperscript{11}

Evidence abounds that whether measured by income, health, or education, many U.S. residents suffer persistent deprivation in comparison to similarly developed nations. We also know that these circumstances can be mitigated by effective policies. The U.S. has, for example, diminished a still considerable black/white education gap in recent years.\textsuperscript{12} Food Stamps have effectively reduced extreme poverty, which remains high. EITC has reduced an astronomically high child poverty as well as poverty among working citizens. Social Security and Medicare have increased the disposable income among the elderly who would otherwise be poor.\textsuperscript{13} Early projections indicate that the Affordable Care Act will increase the disposable income of low-income working age Americans.\textsuperscript{14} We know that other nations with fewer economic resources than our own have accomplished more than the United States in restraining and diminishing poverty.\textsuperscript{15}

Jesus of Nazareth was surely correct to observe that the poor will be with us always, but he did not say that poverty is intractable. In fact, he did much to diminish it in his own time.

\textsuperscript{12} Reardon, “The Widening Achievement Gap Between The Rich and the Poor.”
\textsuperscript{13} Short, SPM 2012, and Wimer, “Trends in Poverty with an Anchored Supplemental Poverty Measure”
We also know that economic growth and a high GDP alone do not necessarily end or even reduce poverty. We need economic growth in order to reduce poverty, but growth alone is insufficient. Increases in per capita GDP accompanied rapid decreases in the poverty rate in the U.S. during the sixties, but increases in GDP per capita from the early eighties to the present, have not produced commensurate decreases in poverty. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), U.S. per capita GDP (calculated in 2011 dollars) increased from just under $30,000 in 1980 to just over $48,000 in 2011, a 60 percent increase.\textsuperscript{16} During this thirty year period, the official U.S. poverty rate actually increased by 28 percent (from 11.7 to 15 percent) and the SPM rate declined by just 11 percent (from 18 to 16 percent).\textsuperscript{17} Clearly, economic growth during this period had a marginal effect on poverty. The BLS GDP data also compares the U.S. to twenty other nations, only one of which (Norway)—if we discount Singapore as idiosyncratic—has a higher per capita GDP and all of which have a lower relative and probably a lower anchored poverty rate (a proximate measure of actual purchasing power) than the U.S.\textsuperscript{18} A very high GDP is not even necessary for low poverty, even though modest and steady economic growth is necessary.

II

I was unaware of these data in 1997 when the undergraduate and law school where I taught for forty years founded an interdisciplinary program in poverty studies. In retrospect, it seems apparent that undergraduate and professional students should know and respond to the facts that I have explicated: the United States is beset with more poverty than other not quite so rich nations and some efforts to diminish poverty in other nations and even in the U.S. have succeeded. Graduates in all fields of study should know that poverty is not a problem in the

\textsuperscript{16} \url{http://www.bls.gov/fls/intl_gdp_capita_gdp_hour.pdf}.\\textsuperscript{17} Wimer, “Trends in Poverty with an Anchored Supplemental Poverty Measure,” Fig. 2.\\textsuperscript{18} \url{http://www.bls.gov/fls/intl_gdp_capita_gdp_hour.pdf}. Smeeding, “Poverty Measurement.”
developing world only. They should know that it is possible to do something about this problem. They should also know that additional remedies are not readily at hand. Effective remedies will require that professionals and citizens in a multiple career paths—not just experts—appreciate the magnitude of the problem and understand what has been and what might be effective in diminishing poverty.

Despite the apparently obvious need, undergraduate education especially has been slow to give poverty the attention it devotes to other social problems in environmental studies, women’s studies, race and ethnic studies, and peace and justice studies. In remainder of my time, I will introduce the Shepherd Higher Education Consortium on Poverty, a nascent non-profit higher education Consortium that seeks to advance poverty studies in undergraduate and professional education. The Consortium now has twenty-two members and has helped to launch similar poverty studies programs in additional schools. I am here because Professor Steve Scanlan and others have invited me so that OU may consider becoming a part of the Shepherd Consortium.

Fortunately, many institutions, some of them in higher education, offer sophisticated research on U.S. and comparative international poverty. My earlier remarks draw heavily on this research. More and better research is always needed; however, it is not currently the most acute need. We must prepare many graduates, not merely a few experts, with the awareness and the sophisticated interdisciplinary knowledge required for professional and civic leaders to address poverty in their work. We can enable our graduates to initiate and effect remedies in education, health, law, business and labor relations, community development, politics and public policy, and, of course, social services and case management. They can be effective in their civic and political leadership as well as in their work.
The prototype for this particular mission in higher education began with a gift from Tom and Reverend Nancy Shepherd to Tom’s alma mater and my employer, Washington and Lee University. For those of you unfamiliar with Washington and Lee, it is a relatively selective liberal arts college and law school with students from predominantly high-income families. (The students were more uniformly wealthy in the mid-1990s, when the Shepherd Program on Poverty started, than they are today.) The Shepherd’s gift was to support an inchoate proposal for poverty studies that included three principal parts.

First, we initiated an introductory interdisciplinary course to introduce students to facts and ideas similar to those that I proffered earlier. It also included discussions of causes of poverty, what justice requires, and viable remedies for different aspects of poverty. We wanted more students to have a basic understanding of poverty in the U.S. as well as internationally. Today, nearly 20 percent of Washington and Lee students take this course before they graduate. Second, students who completed that course were permitted to apply for eight-week summer internships with agencies in urban and rural areas focused on work in health, law, community and economic development, education, and social services. The area of work corresponded to possible future professional interests of the students. From its inception in 1998, the internship program was a collaborative project with Berea College in Kentucky and Spelman College in Atlanta. These institutions were also concerned about broadening the education of their students to include a greater focus on poverty, but Berea and Spelman have different missions and students—different from Washington and Lee and different from each other. Third, students who completed the introductory course and the internship became eligible for a capstone seminar taken by juniors, seniors, and law students. The seminar includes a research paper on a topic the students choose as informed by their internships, previous courses throughout the curriculum,
and anticipated foci in their future professional and civic lives. Law students, of course, have a little more clarity about their professional work.

I wish to highlight four important elements of the three components of this early poverty studies program. First, the courses were rigorous and interdisciplinary, including ethics as well as the social sciences. Second, the education in poverty, not even a minor at that time, was sustained. It was not merely a single shot course or internship. Third, the education was not limited to the classroom. It integrated firsthand experience in an internship with a preparatory course and with follow-up reading and writing of research papers. Fourth, the course of study was designed to enrich, not to replace, majors at the heart of the students’ education. We did and do not seek to mold a new career path. We seek to supplement the one students are developing based on their educational and academic interests. We have enhanced the education of future lawyers, educators, healthcare professionals, businesspersons, government and community leaders, and even social workers and ministers.

It did not take long for numerous students to discover that this poverty-focused education could enrich their educational path to many different careers. Nor did it take long for our faculty, staff, and administration to discover that these studies actually helped students focus on areas of healthcare, community development, education, law, or civic engagement that address poverty. They also noticed that their discipline-based courses could be developed to supplement the poverty-focused aspect of the students’ education. Departments revised or added courses in economics, English, law, politics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Spurred on by student demand, we also added multiple co-curricular programs, enabling poverty-focused community engagement and research during the academic year. Finally, we engaged those beyond our campus who were doing poverty research and working in government to diminish poverty.
Two of these visitors believed that this integrated poverty studies program conducted in collaboration with other colleges addressed a void in higher education. Rebecca Blank, an economist at Northwestern University at the time, recommended that we talk with other schools about collaborating in similar poverty studies programs suitable to their specific resources and missions. Dr. Blank is now Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin following a stint as Acting Secretary of Commerce. David Bradley, Executive Director of the National Community Action Foundation, which supports community action programs across the nation, helped us secure funding for the early alliance of schools and encouraged us to collaborate with more schools to forge integrated and sustained poverty studies throughout undergraduate and professional education. David, a protégé of Sargent Shriver, noted that poverty studies programs enabling tens or hundreds of institutions to graduate thousands of students annually who are deeply informed about poverty had as much promised to diminish U.S. poverty as any initiative he had observed since the seventies. Bold words! David studiously avoids appearing to evince the gravitas of an evangelical preacher, but his advice and vision—along with enthusiastic and repeated encouragement from Chancellor Blank—led us to begin conversations with multiple and diverse institutions in higher education.

There were many fits-and-starts over a long journey to the Shepherd Consortium, also named for Tom and Nancy Shepherd because of their nurturing and generosity. In the summer of 2012, the Shepherd Higher Education Consortium (SHECP) on Poverty became a higher education 501-c-3. It now has twenty-two member schools and others, including OU, considering membership. SHECP is in the midst of a strategic planning process to decide how to expand and to advance poverty studies in higher education. It offers many collaborative activities for faculty, staff, and students.
Like its predecessor in 1998, SHECP collaboration includes a common internship. The student interns prepared at their member institutions receive a common orientation before reporting for work throughout the U.S. At their work sites, they live, dine, and talk together while working with a variety agencies that address poverty firsthand (not through principally through research or administration). Internship programming requires that they report to their faculty and staff and to each other about what they are learning. A closing conference for interns to report on their discoveries includes a symposium on teaching poverty featuring leading practitioners and scholars. You may listen to the previous talks and lectures on the Shepherd Consortium website. This year’s speakers from the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation, the Washington and Lee law school, and the Cleveland Clinic focused on community development in Boston and the Affordable Care Act and poverty.\(^\text{19}\)

Ninety-seven SHECP interns participated in the summer of 2014 working in U.S. locations ranging from Klagetoh, Arizona, to Burlington, Vermont. They constitute SHECP’s third class of interns. You may read essays from some of the interns from 2013 and 2014 on the Consortium website. The website serves as a way for the interns from various schools to continue networking and refreshing what they have learn during their internships and the symposia.

I am eager to discuss other aspects of Consortium collaboration after this talk and in meetings tomorrow. For now, I want to further explicate the purpose of the Consortium as articulated in the current statement of its mission: “to promote and advance sustained curricular and co-curricular education focused on poverty . . . in order to prepare students for a lifetime of professional and civic efforts to diminish poverty and enhance human capability.” This mission statement will be revised and developed in light of an assessment of

\(^{19}\)Shepherdconsortium.org
SHECP currently being conducted by the Curry School of Education at UVA and a strategic planning process mandated by our Board of Directors, but the core mission will remain. The goal is not for SHECP to administer all of poverty studies in undergraduate and professional education. We expect SHECP to become an important institution in higher education and serve the needs of its membership well, but we also seek to encourage multiple collaborative arrangements among hundreds of institutions with a similar mission. We hope that thousands of graduates from hundreds of institutions will receive a sustained education about poverty in the United States so that they will collectively become an anti-poverty initiative that changes the data and reality with which this talk began.

This collective effort will not succeed by uniform activities and a single set of policies and initiatives. It will be effective only if the graduates are independent thinkers united in a commitment to diminish the devastating and multifaceted poverty in our society. Their leadership must be well informed, varied in focus in order to address different aspects of a multi-dimensional problem, and diverse in the understandings and the remedies proposed. Put differently, a compassionate heart is necessary but insufficient to reduce poverty.

The foci must include families, labor markets, education (not merely schools), healthcare and public health, public assistance policies, community development, incarceration policies, legal services, and more. The remedies will emerge from various sources: professional lives, government policies, and civic initiatives. Justice will not emerge from a single policy or practice, whether it be teaching entrepreneurship, ending single-parent families, universal preschool, or a higher minimum wage, which is not to denigrate the possible contributions of any of these social and policy changes.

III
I want to avoid becoming completely bogged down in general claims, even distinctive claims, about this education in poverty studies. I will turn now to some specific examples from specific students. These are examples of what undergraduate and law students at Washington and Lee informed by courses on U.S. poverty; modestly long-term firsthand experience with poverty; in-depth studies of aspects of poverty, and extensive research on a topic of their own choosing can learn—and teach us. I offer three examples. I could offer a hundred, and my colleagues at other SHECP institutions could offer their own. I use Washington and Lee examples because I know these students well.

Although these and other students are not inculcated with a particular point of view, you will notice that their research is informed by ethics, especially the students’ understanding of equality of opportunity, as well as by the social sciences, law, and, in the first example, by biology and bio-chemistry.

Rachael Petry, from a small town in Tennessee, was an undergraduate biology major preparing for medical school. Rachael is enrolled at the University of Tennessee medical school and plans to become a pediatrician. She studied poverty in several courses, completed her internship in healthcare focusing on hospital care for children in Thailand, and volunteered throughout her undergraduate years at the local Free Clinic. Rachael asked me if she could write about breastfeeding by low-income mothers. Of course, she, a possible future pediatrician, could write on this topic. Her request fit perfectly the mission of the Consortium.

Rachael introduces her study with data demonstrating that U.S. women are less likely to initiate breastfeeding than women in eight other developed nations and that low-income, African-American, and young mothers are least likely to initiate breastfeeding. In this case, Mexican-American mothers act more like non-Hispanic Caucasians. Instead of concluding that
low-income, African-American, and young women are irresponsible, Rachael asks if society creates social and cultural barriers for these women to choose to breastfeed.

After exploring the probable physical and psychological benefits—and possible detriments in some cases—of breastfeeding for both mother and child, Rachael considers various barriers for low-income mothers to breastfeed. They included, ironically, vouchers for formula from the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program for low-income women. I hasten to add that WIC policy has changed in recent years. They also include being bound to a labor market that makes use of breast pumps particularly inconvenient. Lack of education—including from physicians—for both males and females with newborns also hinders truly autonomous decisions about breastfeeding. Rachael concludes that these barriers limit the opportunities of some low-income, African-American, and young mothers to breastfeed. It follows that these barriers also limit opportunities for the newborns of these mothers by diminishing their health.

What does Rachael think we should do? She rejects mandatory breastfeeding on the model of mandatory vaccinations, partly because breastfeeding is not beneficial to all mothers and their newborns. Rachael recommends that physicians, nurses, and WIC staff do more to educate pregnant women and the fathers of their children about the palpable benefits of breastfeeding. Education involves more than impersonal and bland information. It requires interpersonal encouragement, and even cajoling, while leaving the decision to breastfeed to the mother. In the context of cultural and habituated attitudes, information alone does not establish autonomy. Rachael, a political conservative, also calls for legislated paid maternity leave for low-income mothers, providing them ample opportunity to initiate breastfeeding and reap its maximum benefits.
Rachael arrives at conclusions informed by social science, science, and ethics rather than by political ideology. She contends that “[b]reastfeeding should not be [a] luxury that only middle-class and wealthy women can access. . . . [W]e have a moral obligation to reduce health inequalities [while respecting] the “autonomy of women to make the decision to breastfeed.” Rachael’s views are informed by equal opportunity for both mothers and for their children.20

Rachel will soon become a pediatrician advising patients from diverse class and racial back grounds. She will also be a civically and political engaged citizen informed about a significant aspect of American poverty.

According to the Population Reference Bureau, the U.S. has highest incarceration rate in the world at 500 per 100,000 compared to a typical rate of 100 per 100,000 for countries similar to us. In 2010, the U.S. incarcerated Black men at a rate of 3,074 per 100,000.21 At present rates, almost one-third of Black males will spend time in prison during their lifetimes.22 Incarceration is a race issue as well as a class issue, and it is increasingly addressed as a poverty issue. Much has been written about incarceration, it consequences, and current sentencing policy. Less has been written about how those leaving incarceration reintegrate into the labor market, family life, and their neighborhoods. When a law student, Caleb David, asked if he could write about how law and policy affects reintegration, I welcomed his proposal. Caleb had worked the previous summer with Congressman Bob Goodlatte, a conservative Republican from our Virginia District. Caleb’s interest in the topic was, in part, evoked by that experience.

Caleb examined state law in Pennsylvania, his home state, and West Virginia, where he interned last summer, and its interaction with federal law and not-for-profit initiatives to reintegrate incarcerated persons into society. He found that reintegration involves more than employment and more than legal support. He found that reintegration requires housing, other forms of public assistance, education, and case management for employment. It also involves changes in employment law. Caleb, informed by a commitment to “remove the scarlet letter” (the subtitle of his paper) and renew opportunities for convicted felons who have paid their dues to society, advocates for what has come to be called “ban-the-box” legislation. This legislation at the state level prohibits the check on a job application indicating that the applicant has never been convicted of a crime. Employers may be permitted to conduct a background check before or after an interview, but they might be prohibited from rejecting persons for some positions simply because of a previous felony conviction. Caleb also favors other more positive support for education, counseling, healthcare, and employment subsidies in order to lubricate the path to reintegration.

Caleb’s argument, like Rachael’s, is grounded in an ethic of opportunity, only in this case he argues for those who have squandered previous opportunities to “truly have opportunities to assimilate back into society” rather than being treated as “undeserving.” He does not succumb to indiscriminate imprudence in applying a principle of equal opportunity. Caleb accepts the need for background checks to protect those who could be at risk of harm from employees hired indiscriminately. He cites and demands data on recidivism to justify policies and practices. Caleb argues that overall programs for reintegration should be justified on broadly conceived and
accurate cost/benefit analysis. Well-intentioned programs are not good enough; they must show results.

I am not sure what kind of law Caleb will practice after graduation. He has shown signs of becoming interested in politics and state and federal legislation. I have no doubt that he will take an active interest in incarceration policy and whether it creates an indelible scarlet letter on released prisoners or serves society’s interest in diminishing poverty and its social costs.

Economics students, interested in careers in finance and business as well as community development, also participate in the Shepherd Program. Caroline Gill, a 2014 graduate, now works for J.P. Morgan Chase in New York. Her internship focused on community development in Camden, New Jersey, but Caroline is also interested in economic policy. After some deliberation emerging from her multiple interests, Caroline decided she wanted to write a paper on trends in federal tax expenditures and their effects on U.S. poverty. You may be asking: What is a tax expenditure? Tax expenditures are revenues the government forfeits by exempting some income from taxes and some income from the usual tax rate or by tax credits, some of which may even be paid to persons who do not owe taxes. Most of us benefit from tax expenditures in some way, even if we do not know exactly what they are and how we benefit. For example, if you or your family receives health insurance from an employer, neither you nor your employer pays federal income tax, payroll taxes, state income tax, or unemployment tax on the premiums for that insurance. But how do tax credits impact on poverty? Caroline Gill understands.

Caroline knew from the outset of her project that tax expenditures may affect the distribution of after-tax income, i.e., they are largely regressive in that they benefit high-income families more than low-income families. In addition, they deplete resources for expenditures on

---

social programs that benefit impoverished persons. Caroline accentuates data showing that the
federal government forfeits $1.2 trillion in annual revenues if no income were excluded from
taxation or tax credits granted. That amount equals total discretionary spending budgeted for
2013 and more than doubles discretionary spending beyond defense. Caroline notes that when
the House sought to reduce the Food Stamp budget by $40B over ten years and to reduce
Medicaid spending in order to avoid a budget deficit, additional revenues gained by limiting tax
expenditures would have changed the debates. To the extent that these programs and others like
early childhood education demonstrably help those in extreme poverty, especially children, and
foster better health and education for those suffering most from gaps between the well-off and
the poor, tax expenditures undermine prudent efforts to reduce poverty.

Caroline also considers the regressive redistributive effects of tax expenditures. Tax
expenditures do not, she notes, advance greater equality of disposable income. They do the
opposite. Of the ten largest tax expenditures in 2013, 7.7 percent of the revenue benefits accrued
to those in the bottom income quintile and 50.6 percent to highest income quintile. The infamous
top one-percent reaped 16.6 percent of the disposable income benefits from these tax
expenditures, slightly less than the 17.8 percent increase in disposable income for the bottom two
quintiles. Caroline shows that tax expenditures counteract much of the progressive rate structure
for income taxes.

She does not conclude that we should eliminate tax expenditures. Not all inequality
causes poverty. Not all inequality is unjust. Some tax expenditures, e.g., those that subsidize
health insurance, investment in the economy, ownership of modest homes, savings for
retirement, and some charitable contributions, promote socially valuable ends. They do more
than benefit the wealthy. Finally, some tax expenditures, e.g. the Earned Income Tax Credit
(EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC), are progressive; they reduce poverty or near poverty for the working poor and for children. Caroline’s paper is informed by facts and prudent judgments about values befitting a just society striving to diminish high and persistent poverty, whether measured by income or by education and health deprivation. Caroline argues for modifying and reducing overall benefits from tax expenditures as well as specific benefits from the home mortgage deduction, the rate of taxes on capital gains at the upper end of the income scale, and the deduction for high-premium health insurance. The Affordable Care Act has partially realized these last two recommendations. Benefits from deductions for pension contributions are already somewhat limited. High income persons cannot defer unlimited amounts of their salaries for pensions. Caroline also advocates strengthening tax expenditures for ETIC and the CTC. She calculates that the overall effect of her proposals would limit redistribution from the poor to the well-off and increase revenues in order to fund effective anti-poverty policies.24

I don’t know what career path Caroline follow. I doubt she knows. I can imagine her in finance, but I can also envision her working in community development, as an academic, or as a policy analyst. I am confident that she will remain interested in how economic policy bears on poverty in the U.S., and if she does not become an expert, she will be among the most highly informed of our citizens about poverty policy and the politics needed to achieve it. Her life’s work—whether as an academic, a policy analyst, a leader in community development, or a citizen—will be shaped by her poverty studies education.

You may read these three research papers—and other excellent student papers—on the Shepherd Consortium website in the section on student research. Eventually, essays by students from all of our Consortium institutions will be published on the Consortium website. I am

confident some in this audience know more than I do or even these student authors know about any one of these issues. The Shepherd Consortium does not intend to produce research scholars and experts, although that happens in a few instances. The purpose is to enable hundreds and thousands of graduates to become educators, health professionals, lawyers, businesspersons, community developers, ministers—and also citizens engaged in their communities and in politics—who can effectively address the poverty that restricts individual opportunities and undermines our society.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the United States has a poverty problem that all of us, especially our college and professional school graduates, need to understand better than we do. I have briefly described a nascent program that seeks to promote a higher education movement to establish sustained poverty studies that parallel interdisciplinary programs in environmental studies and other fields. I have claimed that correctly crafted poverty studies programs can help students address passionately and intelligently the poverty that persistently, although not intractably, plagues us. And, I have offered three examples of individual students delving perceptively into U.S. poverty to identify aspects of the problem and propose inchoate remedies that will inform their professional, civic, and political initiatives to diminish poverty.

The ultimate hope is a movement in higher education that can bring the vision of my friend David Bradley to fruition in the work of graduates who bring poverty in the U.S. to the level at which it exists in some of our peer developed, but less wealthy, nations. I offer no formula to offer, but thousands of empathetic, informed, and thoughtful graduates will offer a myriad of plausible and promising remedies. We need to enable them.
I look forward to talking with you about how Ohio University can play a prominent role in that enabling education.

Harlan Beckley
Executive Director, Shepherd Higher Education Consortium on Poverty
Fletcher Otey Thomas Professor of Religion, emeritus
Washington and Lee University