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Students simulate poverty, learn about socioeconomic challenges

April 19, 2019



Students participated in a poverty simulation to help them understand circumstances of families and students who are experiencing financial difficulties.

What if you had to choose between feeding your family and keeping the power on in your home? What if you lost your job and spent hours, days and even weeks trying to figure out how to receive assistance to help keep a roof over your family's head?

Students in the Georgia Southern University College of Education were asked to put themselves in scenarios like these during a recent poverty simulation hosted by the College's faculty and staff.

Education majors were required to complete this role play activity as a part of a cultural issues course in order to expose student teachers to the low socioeconomic challenges many of their K-12 students experience.

“It is important that as teachers we look deeper into why a student did not complete an assignment or falls asleep in class rather than assuming a student is lazy or otherwise unengaged,” said Michelle Reidel, Ph.D., professor of middle grades and secondary education. “We need to understand that problems in the classroom are not always a direct result of a student’s desire to learn. There are external factors that could be playing a role in their performance or behavior. We have to consider that not all students are having their basic needs met at home.”

Scott Beck, Ph.D., associate professor of middle grades and secondary education, added, “Teachers need to understand that students’ families are working hard to meet those basic needs, but face confusing, contradictory and problematic choices every day.”



Students wait in line to cash their checks during the poverty simulation.

Participants in the simulation were assigned to family units of varying structure and provided with roles and scenarios unique to each family. They were asked to attempt to provide for all the basic needs of their families, including maintaining a residence, keeping the utilities on, feeding each member of the family daily and ensuring they covered loan payments as well as miscellaneous costs such as health and transportation.

Joey Shaffer, a senior middle grades education major, was assigned the role of a boyfriend who was attempting to take care of his girlfriend and their infant child.

“I had to work and hand over all the money to my girlfriend to try to pay the bills,” said Shaffer. “There was nothing left each week. I’ve lived some hard times myself, and it’s important that we think about how this would affect our students. They would be exhausted by this.”

Amber Culver, senior elementary education major, was given the role of a 42-year-old father with a wife, three children and a grandchild on the way. Culver's scenario included that her character had lost his job and unemployment payments were no longer available.

"To be honest, even though it was just a simulation, it was very hard and very stressful," said Culver.

"There were times I felt like less of a person. I wanted to cry, and I even considered leaving the family so there would be one less mouth to feed."

Culver said she often found herself relying on the 8- and 10-year-old children to take care of themselves because the wife and teenager needed to work to support the family.

"There were times that my brain would just freeze, and I thought, 'I don't even know what I should or would do,'" she added. "This activity put me in a real-life situation where I can relate more to my students. I want to let those students know that I will be there for them and know the resources they might be able to utilize."

The poverty simulation was hosted for approximately 70 [undergraduate education majors](#) and [Master of Arts in Teaching](#) graduate students. The College is planning to host the activity every semester.

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