How Will We Ensure Just and Equitable Societies?

Multiple GC ideas clustered around themes of inequality, injustice, and concomitant disparities in health, education, economic or social well-being, peace, and human rights at the level of communities and societies. Addressing violence in multiple forms was a salient theme in this cluster, including intergroup conflicts related to ethnic heritage or religion, violence against women or girls, and the “structural violence” of unequal opportunities to survive or thrive related to poverty, discrimination, and other forms of social disadvantage or oppression. Solutions included broad efforts to conduct research that would advance human rights, trustworthy organizations, vibrant communities, peace, as well as specific initiatives to boost access to healthy food in cities, use simulation tools to improve humanitarian relief efforts, reform the penal system, or invest in early childhood to protect brain development.

Proposals underscored the importance of confronting inequities in order to promote a healthy future for local, state, and international well-being. Global inequalities are fueling instability, political conflict, and a rising tide of migration that is threatening the lives and future of people around the world. Closer to home, in the Twin Cities—arguably a generally healthy and wealthy city—the future is jeopardized by serious disparities in health, economic well-being, and achievement related to poverty and adverse living conditions, with many children and families facing homelessness, food insecurity, school failure, unemployment, illnesses, and a bleak outlook for improvement.

Broad strengths of the University were noted for addressing these challenges, including the following: the urban location of two campuses, the tremendous breadth and depth of faculty and students from multiple disciplines whose research focuses on and who are committed to solving problems of equity, and numerous ties of the University to many people and organizations — regional, national, and international—concerned with equity, human rights, and social justice. Specific University strengths related to addressing equity challenges include deep expertise on human rights, health and human development across the lifespan, indigenous and immigrant peoples and cultures, religion, public policy, reconciliation and restorative justice, violence and peacemaking, among numerous other fields that were beautifully articulated in the ideas submitted.

There are exciting possibilities for linking and integrating ideas in this forum to build powerful research-practice alliances for high-impact change. Multiple ideas, for example, would align in a comprehensive effort to confront inequalities in contrasting urban and rural areas of Minnesota as models for addressing inequalities. Solutions could include a combination of equitable access to healthcare, food, housing, education and childcare, transportation, and other essentials for building health and resilience in children and families, while also addressing related problems, such as mass incarceration and exposure to traumatic experiences that impair child and family well-being, and human well-being over the life course. Another possibility is a multi-level peace-building effort to reduce violence at all levels of society (domestic violence to political conflict), promoting human
rights, structural justice, and reconciliation, along with safe families, schools, and neighborhoods, building on the notable diversity of Minnesota people and their ways of seeking peace, as well as faculty expertise in human rights, reconciliation, intergroup relations, mindfulness, and many other strategies for preventing violence and promoting peace in societies.

Of course, there are many other ways to integrate the striking ideas brought forward for this forum on themes of equity on the road to formulating Grand Challenges for the University. Moreover, new ideas may emerge from our discussions, such as tying in equity and social justice in managing water or other resources. Discussions from this forum can profoundly shape one or more Grand Challenges on the broad theme of how we will ensure just and equitable societies.

*Summary by members of the Provost’s Grand Challenges Research Strategies Team, October 2015*

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