Our Kids – The American Dream in Crisis
By Robert D. Putnam
A Brief Book Review by David Boren

OU students could not have selected a better book to read together than Robert Putnam’s new book: Our Kids – The American Dream in Crisis. Putnam is best known for his book of several years ago, Bowling Alone, which stressed the importance of social capital and volunteerism in American Society.

Putnam, a Harvard sociologist has once again written a book of great importance. It is about the threat to the American Dream. What is the “American Dream” as he defines it? It is not that every individual should have equal success or equal resources. It is that every American should have a reasonable opportunity to succeed.

The book summarizes several major threats to the goal of equal opportunity. These threats are expressed objectively through statistics but are also engagingly described through the stories of different American families and their children.

Economic inequality among Americans is rapidly growing and the middle class is shrinking. Families whose living standards are falling can provide fewer opportunities for their children. Children in poverty do not receive the early childhood development which they need to succeed for the rest of their lives. Children from less affluent families are given fewer enrichment activities in their schools. Families whose members are less affluent and less well educated are far more likely to fall apart and end up in the divorces of parents.

Communities where poorer children live have fewer mentors for them and fewer support groups. Children who grow up in these limited circumstances are far less likely to go onto college. This leads to Putnam’s principal threat that equal opportunity is an unequal opportunity to obtain a quality education.

Those who don’t go beyond high school are far more limited in terms of opportunity for economic success. Upward mobility in the entire society is greatly reduced because these families are far less likely to be able to provide a college education for their children. Less educated Americans are far more likely to go to prison, depend on public assistance, and are much less economically productive as time goes on. The cost to society for dealing with their needs becomes more burdensome.

How can this downward spiral be reversed?

Putnam presents some suggestions. Some of them have the effect of narrowing economic gaps through taxes and other policies. The most important ones are aimed at giving all Americans, including the most economically distressed Americans an equal opportunity for the best possible education. He argues
effectively for more programs for early childhood nurturing and development. His argument implies the need for a major effort to make higher education more affordable for all.

Putnam is right to warn us that the American Dream is in Crisis. Some of his suggestions have merit. Above all, the book is a call to each of us for careful thought and urgent action.