Dear Colleague,

Every year Mississippi ranks as one of the worst states for women. Teenage pregnancy curtails aspirations. Career opportunities remain scarce. And lack of advanced education puts economic stability even farther out of reach. The Women’s Foundation of Mississippi is reversing these statistics and creating opportunity. We know that when women thrive, Mississippi thrives.

Two statewide statistics are revealing: #1: 70% of teen pregnancies in Mississippi are among 18- and 19-year-olds, and #2: it takes an average of seven years for a student to complete a degree at community college. We believe that those two statistics are related, and our goal is to decrease both of those numbers.

In 2014, the Women’s Foundation commissioned a survey by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research of women attending community college in Mississippi. Informed by the findings of that survey — and the supports and practices it revealed that women need to succeed in college and attain economic security — the Foundation has awarded a total of $670,000 in grants in support of innovative, woman-focused programs run by, or in close collaboration with, community colleges.

The following case studies highlight the successes, challenges, and lessons learned by these 2014–15 grantees and program participants.

Warmly,

Carol B. Penick
Executive Director
Women’s Foundation of Mississippi
BUILDING WOMEN’S ECONOMIC SECURITY

PAVING THE WAY FOR ACADEMIC AND CAREER SUCCESS
COAHOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

AMPLIFYING WOMEN’S VOICES AND BUILDING SKILLS
EAST MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE

HELPING WOMEN OVERCOME FINANCIAL CRISSES
JONES COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE

PROVIDING LIFE-CHANGING LEGAL AID
HOLMES COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CONCLUSION

ABOUT THIS REPORT
THE ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES MAKE THEM A STEPPING STONE OUT OF POVERTY FOR COUNTLESS LOW-INCOME WOMEN, including young high school graduates, adults returning to school after years caring for children and other family members, and those wishing to go beyond low-wage jobs. The Women’s Foundation of Mississippi’s Access to Opportunity grant program aims to significantly increase graduation and overall success rates for the high number of low-income women in the state who enroll in community college. Informed by the findings of a 2014 report by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research that the Foundation commissioned — *Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi Community Colleges* — the foundation has awarded a total of $670,000 in grants in support of innovative, woman-focused programs run by or in close collaboration with community colleges.

THE FOLLOWING CASE STUDIES HIGHLIGHT THE SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES, AND LESSONS LEARNED BY THESE 2014−15 ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY GRANTEES AND PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS:

**COAHOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

The Career Counseling and Remedial Prep Program for Women provides career counseling and preparatory remedial training in math, reading, and English at Coahoma Community College in the northwestern corner of the Mississippi Delta.

**JONES COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE**

The Women’s Emergency Fund provides small grants to women attending Jones County Community College, in south-central Mississippi, who are facing temporary emergencies that threaten to prevent them from completing their education.

**MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE**

Through its Community College Legal Clinic, the Mississippi Center for Justice provides informational workshops and direct legal assistance to women in the Mississippi Delta attending Holmes Community College who are facing barriers to education, housing, employment, and other means to economic security.

**MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH CENTER**

The Social Science Research Center’s EMPOWR (Empowering Mentors to Promote Women’s Retention) program matches women in their freshman year at East Mississippi Community College with sophomore student mentors and provides discussion sessions and opportunities to make recommendations to campus administration.
The Career Counseling and Remedial Prep Program for Women (CCRPPW) at Coahoma Community College (CCC) provides career counseling and training in math, reading, and English for students whose placement exam scores indicate that they need remedial courses. A public community college in the Mississippi Delta region, CCC is the only historically black two-year college in the state. The CCRPPW program was designed to help low-income women who face critical challenges related to family and finances that often lead them to indefinitely postpone pursuing a college education and career pathway.
HOW IT WORKS

The program’s academic component aims to reduce the number of women needing to enroll in remedial classes by improving their skills so that they score better when they retake the placement exam, thus reducing their financial burden and the number of semesters needed to obtain a degree. The career counseling component develops participants’ self-knowledge and helps them explore educational and occupational options and plan their career. “Wrap-up sessions,” or discussion circles, at the end of the day help students to recall and summarize what they found useful and hear what others learned and were inspired by. These sessions also help staff learn about what was most helpful and how they can make future sessions even more beneficial.

To recruit participants, CCRPPW staff obtained records of students requiring remedial coursework in math or English from the CCC admissions office and contacted those students to invite them to participate in the program. After the first semester, some students were referred to the program by other campus personnel or by other students. Approximately 25 students identified as needing remedial coursework were invited to participate in the spring 2015 semester (15 completed the program), and a similar number were invited in the fall (19 completed). On their first day, students completed an academic pre-assessment test and a pre-career strength assessment and interest inventory. The program consisted of six Saturdays of workshops (expanding to eight Saturdays in fall 2015): four hours for academic instruction and three hours for career counseling and skill development, with lunch provided.

PARTNERS IN IMPLEMENTATION

The success of the CCRPPW and the other models featured throughout this report rest in large part on the engagement of various committee partners. Dr. Rolanda Brown, CCC’s dean of academic affairs, characterizes her campus as “very collaborative.” She cites the following departments and individuals as helping to make the program a success:

- After program staff had access to the admissions records identifying which students would require remedial courses, the director of student services identified which of those students lived on campus, so staff could speak directly with them about the program. Program staff believe that contacting students in person is the most effective recruitment strategy, and in their experience, students living on campus are more likely than commuting students to be interested in attending the program. The director also extended the program access to computer software that helps match students’ strengths to careers, and she allowed the program to engage food services staff to serve lunch, saving the expense of hiring an outside caterer.

- Career and technical education teachers delivered career counseling workshops.

- Academic instructors worked through lunch so that late-arriving students could make up the work they missed, and a math instructor invited students to see her for extra help on assignments from their Saturday sessions during the regular school week.

- Local professionals from the community volunteered their time to speak with students about their own careers and career pathways.

- Local electricity provider Entergy awarded scholarships to several parents in the program through one of its scholarship funds for Mississippi students.
Dr. Rolanda Brown, dean of academic affairs at CCC, saw that a few students were not initially engaged in a math instructor’s lesson. She notes, “Then when the instructor used the iPad to play a game to teach or reinforce what she taught, some of them ‘got it.’ We invested in the iPads because of research that shows that with students who are two or three levels behind in reading, incorporating technology is an excellent strategy in helping them to build skills. I was thankful that we took that research seriously.”

Dr. Brown also describes the transformation the program’s career component brought about for participants. She explains,

“In those career sessions, they begin to see that it’s really possible: they really can acquire what they need for a career. Professionals from the community came in and did mock interviews with them, and you could see the students’ confidence growing. They could see themselves doing it; they could see themselves as career women.”

• **Participant Gains:** Participants developed job-seeking skills, such as how to create a résumé and interview with confidence. They learned about career opportunities in their community and associated wages, and they explored career pathways with volunteer presenters who discussed how they came to their own careers. Participants also learned how to weigh the costs and benefits of commuting for work (e.g., gas expenses versus higher pay) and other practical job-related issues.

15 number of women who completed the program spring 2015 semester

19 number of women who completed the program fall 2015 semester

34 total number of women completing to date.

• **Systems Change:** By bringing student concerns about challenges they face to campus administration, program staff help to bring about systems change. Program participants told staff they were having trouble accessing the college — not only on Saturdays to attend the program but at all times — because there was no public bus route in the city where CCC is located. Staff received permission from a college administrator to conduct a student survey and brought the results, as well as information from conversations with teachers, to the college’s executive team. In response, the college will run a bus route through the city beginning in 2016.

• **Ripple Effects:** The program’s reach extends beyond the current participants. In fact, several participants have referred friends and family members to the program, and many say they talk to their children about what they are learning from the program, asking if they know what they want to be when they grow up and telling them about careers in their area and other steps they will need to take to achieve their goals.
**LOOKING AHEAD**

- **Improving Student Completion Rates:** Some students began the program enthusiastically but were unable to consistently attend. Going forward, staff will proactively talk with each participant to raise awareness of the potential challenges and help them problem-solve so that they can remain in the program until the end.

- **Engaging New Partners:** Community leaders, such as those who volunteer to present at the career workshops, have expressed interest in helping to maintain the program. While Women’s Foundation support extends through fall 2016, program staff are talking about longer-term sustainability. They may work with the local chambers of commerce and nearby towns and hold gatherings for community members and business leaders who would be interested in contributing their time and resources to a program that helps prepare the future workforce.

- **Replication:** While no other colleges have yet taken steps to replicate the program on their own campus, the other Access to Opportunity grantees who learned about the program at gatherings hosted by the Women’s Foundation have expressed interest in having a similar program at their school sites. For any college that is considering replication but is concerned about costs, Dr. Brown suggests that instructors could schedule remediation instruction during the regular school day (with reduced regular teaching loads), when students are already on campus and instructors would not have to be compensated for an extra day of travel and instruction. She also emphasizes the importance of being flexible and responsive to student needs each semester.

**A RETURNING STUDENT STARTS ON THE PATH TO A BETTER JOB**

A mother with three children participated in Coahoma Community College’s Career Counseling and Remedial Prep Program for Women in the spring of 2015. She had a job but wanted a better one. After being out of school for years, she struggled with the demands of reading at night, making sense of what instructors wanted on tests, and just putting her children to bed and having some time for herself. She said of the program, “THIS WAS A BIG SACRIFICE ASKING FAMILY MEMBERS TO KEEP THE KIDS ALL DAY SATURDAY FOR ME, BUT IT FELT LIKE IT WAS WORTH IT. I FEEL LIKE I CAN GET THROUGH AND OUT OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN A REASONABLE TIME AND GET A GOOD JOB.” The program’s design, which encourages students to ask questions and provides supplemental help with academic subjects, is a good match for a non-traditional student. Although getting back into the culture of life as a college student was demanding, the program helped her to make the adjustments needed to be a student again.
LESSONS TO SHARE

RECRUITMENT

Be open to rethinking a recruitment strategy.
Before the program’s first semester, staff recruited students whose records showed they were enrolling in remedial courses. However, they soon realized that some students who wanted to enroll in those courses had not been able to if those courses were full. In spring 2015, staff reviewed admissions records to see who would be required to take remedial courses in the fall and successfully recruited many more students for the program’s second semester of operation.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Be ready to change the program based on student needs.
• During the first semester, program staff realized that a lack of consistent child care was a major barrier to women’s participation, as women waited for relatives to get off all-night work shifts or scrambled to find a new volunteer caretaker each week. After communicating with the Women’s Foundation, program staff were permitted to provide stipends so participants could pay people (generally friends and family) who could then commit to providing regular child care.
• Some women only attend the morning academic session, while others attend only the afternoon career session. Program staff decided not to require the women to attend both components in order to be able to participate, reasoning that they receive important benefits from either component.
• At first, program staff provided light snacks in the morning, but students told them they were still hungry. Program staff reviewed their budget and began serving breakfast. Breakfast time itself became a learning opportunity, as staff talked to students about the importance of breakfast and healthy nutritional choices, and students exchanged ideas about career choices.

SELECTION AND SUPPORT OF PROGRAM INSTRUCTORS

Engage instructors who will tailor their approach to the students.
Instructors were invited to volunteer to work in the program (for a stipend), rather than being assigned. Dr. Brown explains, “Just because someone is an excellent teacher doesn’t mean they are cut out to work with the ones who are struggling academically. It takes more than just knowing content; it takes heart to have something like this be successful.”

Provide compensation for instructors’ time and transportation expenses.
Teachers may need help to pay for gas and allocate time to return to campus on a regularly non-teaching day.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS/PROVIDING WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Listen to students and share pertinent information with college administration to remove barriers and facilitate student success.
Because they invited student input, staff heard about and addressed issues related to child care, transportation, and the need for breakfast.

“When you’re dealing with people with real issues and real lives, it doesn’t all fall so nicely into this neat little order. The journey to success gets a little messy. We’ve resigned ourselves to deal with whatever comes up. There are adjustments and readjustments throughout the semester and with each program component.”
— Dr. Rolanda Brown, CCC Dean of Academic Affairs
The program was created with the aim of helping both the mentors and mentees to succeed in college, as both roles can help students at risk of dropping out by building social interaction and mutual support. EMPOWR was piloted in 2014–15 at the Golden Triangle campus of East Mississippi Community College (EMCC), an MSU feeder school about 10 miles away from Starkville. EMPOWR is being held at the same campus in 2015–16.
HOW IT WORKS

Freshman students whose records show a risk of dropping out (e.g., absences and poor test grades) are recruited by EMCC staff to be matched with recruited mentors — sophomores who seemed at risk of dropping out in their freshman year but persisted. During the fall semester, mentors receive a two-hour training on listening skills, expectations, boundaries, and the overall program. After a kickoff event in late fall to generate excitement about the program and introduce mentors and their mentees, participants are expected to begin meeting during the spring for at least one hour, three times a month, to discuss general personal issues and for mentors to connect mentees with academic tutoring, as needed. Mentees who complete the program receive stipends of $100, and mentors receive $200. A total of 59 women — 12 mentors and 12 mentees in the fall 2014 semester, and 20 mentors and 15 mentees so far in the fall 2015 semester (with the hope of identifying more mentees early in 2016) — have been recruited to the program to date.

The second component of EMPOWR requires all mentors and mentees to attend five monthly speaker sessions with interactive discussions. Sessions address topics such as strong relationships, stress management, health and wellness, personal finance, and career counseling. Following each speaker’s presentation, students discuss their needs related to the day’s topic and — in response to focus group findings that nontraditional women students feel campus administrators are unaware of their unique needs — they are invited to make recommendations to EMCC’s administration about ways the college can better meet their needs, which are conveyed anonymously by program staff. The program is capped at the end of the academic year by a banquet where certificates of completion are issued for all participants.

“THESE WOMEN HAVE BEEN VERY OPEN ABOUT SHARING WHAT THEY’RE LEARNING WITH THEIR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN. THEY’RE TRYING SO HARD TO MAKE A BETTER LIFE FOR THEMSELVES, BUT THAT AFFECTS THEIR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN, TOO. THEY’RE HOPING THAT THEY CAN BE EXAMPLES FOR THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS. SO MANY OF OUR MENTORS AND MENTEES ARE FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS, AND THEY’RE TRYING TO ENCOURAGE THEIR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN TO REALIZE THAT HARD WORK DOES PAY OFF AND THAT AN EDUCATION CAN LEAD TO GREATER ECONOMIC SECURITY.”

— ANNE BUFFINGTON,
LEAD RESEARCHER AT MSU SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH CENTER
PARTNERS IN IMPLEMENTATION

Anne Buffington, lead researcher at MSU’s Social Science Research Center, highlights the following key partners and champions of the EMPOWR program:

- EMCC’s administration, including the campus’s vice president and the president of the entire EMCC system, and the Golden Triangle campus dean of students each played an invaluable part in planning, working out logistics, and recruitment.
- The Create Foundation, a community foundation serving northeast Mississippi, co-sponsored the year-end banquet in May 2015.
- The Pilot Club, a volunteer service organization for business and professional women, paid for one mentor’s incentive and for gift certificates for all who completed the program in spring 2015. The Pilot Club may be able to contribute to the program again in a future semester.
- Individual businesswomen and educators in the community donated their time as interactive session presenters.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

Since the beginning of the program, five mentors have graduated, and at least four of them have gone on to a four-year institution. After the first year, many mentors and mentees reported that they experienced less stress about school and life challenges, a greater sense of belonging and identification with the school, and greater optimism about their ability to reach their goals.

- Participant Gains: Of the 13 mentees completing the fall 2015 semester with the program:
  - 06 improved their fall GPA, compared with their previous term
  - 03 made the president’s list
  - 01 made the dean’s list
  - 01 who had withdrawn from class early in the fall returned

- Systems Change: Administrators are now more aware of the struggles non-traditional women students face, such as not knowing how to navigate the campus, find classes, or buy books.
- Ripple Effects: Participants shared information and materials about personal finance and other topics with friends and family.

LOOKING AHEAD

- Building Effectiveness: A decision to incorporate reproductive health in the interactive sessions may increase the program’s effectiveness by helping students avoid unwanted pregnancies, the reason several original mentees left college after joining the program.
- Replication: MSU staff are developing a toolkit with instructions on how to replicate EMPOWR for the Women’s Foundation to share with others. After a presentation of the program’s evaluation findings at a conference on mentoring at the University of New Mexico, stakeholders at a community college in Northern California expressed interest in replication. In addition, EMPOWR’s developers at MSU hope to reach out to the Mississippi Association of Grantmakers, the Create Foundation, the Pilot Club, and others to generate interest in supporting replication in multiple counties and colleges in the state. The MSU Social Science Research Center received Independent Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation, which showed multiple benefits for all program participants. Reflecting on this evaluation and personal observation, Ms. Buffington believes that even without the mentoring component, replicating the interactive sessions would be a powerful model, because they “give the women a voice.”
A YOUNG MOTHER THRIVES WITH NEW LIFE SKILLS AND FRIENDSHIP

Andrea was a newcomer to the state and to college with no support network when she became an EMPOWR mentee. A 25-year-old single mother until her recent marriage, she plans to obtain a B.A. in business technology. Even though her husband’s medical condition required them to move 150 miles away, the friendship she forged with her mentor endures, and she is continuing her studies at EMCC online. Of her mentor, she says, “She’s still a life mentor.” Andrea found the personal finance, stress management, and time management interactive sessions to be eye-opening. “I don’t stress as much,” she explains, “I balance things out a lot better than I used to. I figured out ways to manage the finances better. Health-wise, I’ve taken more notice, and I don’t just worry about everyone else.” Because of the skills she gained through the EMPOWR program, she has been able to help her husband and her son.

Summing up her EMPOWR experience, she says,

“WHEN I GOT ON CAMPUS, I DIDN’T KNOW WHERE TO GO FOR INFORMATION. WE GOT TO SAY WHAT WE THOUGHT WOULD MAKE IT BETTER. WE MIGHT HAVE HARD PERSONAL LIVES, BUT WE SHOULDN’T HAVE HARD ACADEMIC LIVES.”

The student’s name in the above account has been changed in order to protect her privacy.
LESSONS TO SHARE

RECRUITMENT

The most effective recruitment strategy is to speak to faculty directly about the program. Teachers know which of their students would benefit from the program. While there was little response to an email announcing the program, excitement grew and referrals came after EMCC staff overseeing EMPOWR and the program designers at MSU spoke with faculty in person.

Recruitment and retention can be difficult because participants most in need of support often do not feel they have time. Participation can be a challenge for the very reasons it can be beneficial: The women are working more than one job, raising children, and trying to go to school, and they do not feel like they can take on another commitment. EMPOWR staff do not have solutions to this challenge, but they hope that women will continue to see and tell others about the value of participation, in spite of the sacrifices involved.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Learn from participants what they need to make the program work. At first, mentors were required to meet with their mentees on campus during school hours. Program staff soon realized that this could pose an unnecessary barrier, and they began to support program participants in meeting however they preferred.

Although face-to-face meetings are preferred, social media, texting, and phone contact are also encouraged. Anne Buffington, one of the program’s designers explains, “We found that eliminating stringent requirements allowed the participants to develop lasting relationships that continue today.”

Provide education about topics that are relevant to women’s lives, and be sure they feel their voices are heard. Summarizing findings of the evaluation conducted by the MSU Social Science Research Center staff in July 2015, Ms. Buffington explained that participating in the interactive sessions as equals (staff participate, too) and having a voice on campus helps the women feel empowered and inspired to continue their education.

PROVIDING WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Offer nontraditional students mental health support. During the interactive discussion following a presentation on stress by an MSU counselor, a participant said she had joined the program because a conversation with a previous semester’s mentor had helped her get through a time when she felt overwhelmed to the point of being suicidal. When she learned about EMPOWR from this mentor, she decided to join the program, believing that if one conversation helped her, being matched with a mentor would help her even more. Later in the interactive discussion, the guest presenter offered to provide the group a free training in the future on how to interact with people who are suicidal and what steps to take; all the women replied that they would appreciate it and find it very helpful.

BUILDING SUPPORT OF COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

Use stories and the experiences of program participants to inspire college administrators to become champions of the program. While the EMCC dean of students was already supportive, after seeing a final report on EMPOWR’s first year, including quotes from mentors and mentees about how much the program helped them, she is hopeful that the college will be able to continue the program, even after the Women’s Foundation grant ends.
The Women’s Emergency Fund (WEF) was established after a review of the records of women who had dropped out of Jones County Junior College (JCJC) in recent semesters yielded data showing that at least 30% did so for financial reasons. WEF was designed to: (1) establish a referral and review process for female students experiencing emergency financial situations; (2) provide small grants to women whose continued education is threatened by temporary emergencies, such as those related to healthcare, child care, transportation, food, utilities, or other short-term financial burdens; and (3) create a long-term, discretionary, self-sustaining emergency assistance fund with voluntary contributions by JCJC personnel.
HELPING WOMEN OVERCOME FINANCIAL CRISSES
AT JONES COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE

HOW IT WORKS
A woman attending JCJC is referred to WEF staff by an instructor or other college department personnel who become aware of a financial hardship the student is experiencing. The student submits an application for funds to the WEF project manager, who may then decide to interview the student and submit the application and interview notes via e-mail to a committee consisting of the assistant director of financial aid, an academic instructor, and a former nontraditional student who is a JCJC alumna. The committee renders a decision within 24 to 48 hours; approved students receive a check almost immediately thereafter. Grant amounts are determined based on specific need and have ranged from a low of $15 to a high of $1,500. Forty-three women have received grants since the start of the project in spring 2015.

GRANT AMOUNTS ARE DETERMINED BASED ON SPECIFIC NEED AND HAVE RANGED FROM A LOW OF $15 TO A HIGH OF $1,500. FORTY-THREE WOMEN HAVE RECEIVED GRANTS SINCE THE START OF THE PROJECT IN SPRING 2015.

PARTNERS IN IMPLEMENTATION
Pam Brownlee, WEF project manager and faculty member, and WEF grant manager and emergency technology instructor Michael Cole cite the following key WEF partners:

- Teaching and health care staff have been the greatest champions of WEF. Academic instructors and the school nurse provided some of the earliest referrals to the program. The director of the licensed practical nursing department has been an enthusiastic proponent of WEF and a consistent source of referrals.

- The JCJC staff members and alumna who form the WEF grant application review committee are invaluable in the process of discerning which students truly meet the criteria for grants and those who have needs that are not aligned with the grant’s purpose of emergency support without which a woman would likely need to withdraw from school.

- The college administration has been supportive of the grantmaking component of WEF, which aligns with a recent strategic plan focus on reducing attrition at JCJC.

- As WEF enters its second year, a key member of JCJC’s administration with authority over whether and how the voluntary contributions portion of WEF is implemented is becoming an important partner in securing WEF’s long-term sustainability.
ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

• Participant Gains:

TEST FEES
Three students were able to pay state licensing test fees so they could obtain work as full-time registered nurses (RNs).

TRANSPORTATION
Others were able to pay for car repairs, without which they would have had no transportation to school.

MEDICATION
Still others were able to pay for medication to address physical and mental health needs.

BASIC NEEDS
Two students who left physically abusive relationships used grants to pay for food, electricity, and other basics needed to establish new homes with their young children.

FINANCIAL HURDLES
Some of the women qualified for financial aid, while many did not, but their WEF grant enabled them to surmount short-term financial hurdles that threatened their ability to continue with their education.

• Systems Change: While WEF has not changed financial aid policies, it seems to have raised the awareness of financial aid staff to the needs of many students, particularly women. Now, staff are more open to working with a woman to see whether she can obtain federal financial aid for her situation and, if not, to referring her to WEF.

• Ripple Effects: Students talk to other students about the program. Rather than leading to a deluge of applications (which WEF staff thought could happen), it has given more students on campus hope and the means to stay in school. The children of students who have been able to leave abusive relationships and students who have been able to obtain full-time professional work because of WEF assistance are benefiting as well.

SMALL GRANT: BIG IMPACT

WOMEN’S EMERGENCY FUND (WEF) GRANTS WENT TO OVER 40 STUDENTS DURING THE PROJECT’S FIRST TWO SEMESTERS.

HERE ARE FIVE OF THEIR STORIES:

1. A 19-year-old with severe allergies and no parental support received money to purchase an EpiPen, which would help her survive in the event of a life-threatening reaction until she could get to a hospital. Because the restaurant where she works uses many foods she is allergic to, the EpiPen enabled her to continue working. The WEF team is helping her apply for insurance through the Affordable Care Act.

2. A single mother of two was unable to afford the fee to take the state exam to become a licensed RN. Her husband was out of contact and not helping to support the family. A WEF grant paid her exam fee, and she is now working full-time as an RN.

3. A student who lived an hour away had serious car trouble and was going to be unable to come to school any longer. A WEF grant of $1,500 paid directly to her car repair shop allowed her to safely continue her studies.

4. A student was unable to afford blood pressure medication while waiting for financial aid to come through. A WEF grant of $15 covered her immediate need.

5. A nursing instructor learned that one of her students had recently left an abusive relationship and, although she had found a place to stay, she did have not enough money to get the electricity turned on or buy groceries for herself and her child as they moved in. She received a WEF grant within 24 hours of applying, which helped her get set up in her new home.
LOOKING AHEAD

• **Building Sustainability:** WEF staff hope to be able to launch the voluntary contribution component of the project in spring 2016. While the details are still being worked out with the college administration, they are developing a message that would tell staff what even a small contribution could do (e.g., “$10 would cover a student’s meal”).

• **Expanding Impact:** WEF has raised awareness about issues that women on campus face, and now there is a desire among WEF staff and teachers to help low-income and nontraditional male students who are in crisis, too. When there is a self-sustaining fund of staff contributions, the plan is for the fund to become a “Student Emergency Fund.”

• **Replication:** There has been strong interest in the project by people at two different community colleges in Mississippi, although no one seems to have replicated it yet. WEF staff strongly recommend the project for other schools.

WITH BASIC NEEDS COVERED, A NURSING STUDENT STAYS ON TRACK TO GRADUATE

The husband of a student with three children in diapers needed brain surgery and had lost his job. The family had lost their home and moved to a mobile home with no appliances. Although her financial aid was paying for her tuition, it did not cover living expenses, and the student thought she would have to quit school to find a job so they could get a stove and air conditioner. Her emergency grant paid for a window air conditioning unit and a stove and helped her to complete the summer semester courses in her associate’s degree nursing program. She is now enrolled in her final semester of the associate degree nursing program and will graduate in May 2016. After that, she and the Emergency Fund staff are looking forward to her taking the state board exam for her nursing license, and they are sure she will become an asset to the nursing profession. Her family is doing well, too.
LESSONS TO SHARE

“WE HAVE JUST BEEN VERY GRATEFUL TO THE WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MISSISSIPPI FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY. OUR STUDENTS HAVE BENEFITED. WE HAVE BENEFITED FROM TALKING TO SOME OF THESE LADIES. IT HAS OPENED OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO SITUATIONS THAT WE DIDN’T KNOW EXISTED HERE ON OUR CAMPUS.”

— Pam Brownlee, Women’s Emergency Fund Project Manager

LAYING THE FOUNDATION WITH COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

Ensure that all members of the college’s administration are well-informed about the program’s goals, design, and details before it begins.

It became apparent that not all administrators whose buy-in was essential to the program’s implementation had been fully informed about it or had “signed off” on it. People in the administration, even in interim positions, should all be approached directly about the project to ensure the fullest and smoothest possible implementation.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Recruit a committee to help make decisions about grant applications.

The highly responsive, discerning members of the WEF application review committee enable grants to be made to the most appropriate students, often in less than 48 hours.

Include the financial aid department in emergency grant decisions.

It is important to check with financial aid staff to be sure a grant will not change a student’s income in a way that will jeopardize her ability to receive any existing federal financial aid.

Be ready to change the program based on student needs.

Originally, WEF staff expected to award $100 grants to pay for books, emergency food, and other small expenses. It soon became apparent that the women’s needs covered a far greater range, and the award limit was changed to address them. Initially, WEF guidelines precluded grants being used to cover tuition costs. However, WEF staff began receiving requests and hearing about students who were going to withdraw from the college due to not being able to pay their full tuition. WEF staff spoke to the Women’s Foundation staff, who allowed WEF grant money to be applied to tuition, helping more students to remain in college.

BUILDING ONGOING SUPPORT OF COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

Be persistent and creative in garnering additional and ongoing administrative buy-in once the program begins.

Continuing to make the case for how the program aligns with college goals and sharing individuals’ stories of program beneficiaries can help garner vital support.

“THE RESEARCH WE CONDUCTED OF OUR OWN DATA TO DESIGN THIS PROGRAM LAUNCHED ALMOST A NEW CULTURE. IT WAS MORE THAN A ‘WOW.’ IT WAS A BIG SURPRISE. WE FOUND THAT THE MAIN REASONS FOR THE WOMEN WITHDRAWING WERE FINANCIAL ISSUES. EVERYBODY ON OUR CAMPUS IS NOW FOCUSED ON PREVENTING WOMEN FROM WITHDRAWING.”

— Michael Cole, Emergency Technology Instructor and Women’s Emergency Fund Grant Manager
The Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ) Community College Legal Clinic at Holmes Community College provides informational workshops and direct legal assistance to women facing issues that cause great financial strain, such as unpaid loans that prevent access to federal financial aid, records of criminal arrests or convictions that bar them from many job and career opportunities, and unresolved divorce and child care matters. The Legal Clinic was launched at Holmes Community College, serving its three campuses: Goodman, Grenada, and Ridgeland.
How it Works

MCJ visits each Holmes campus monthly and advertises workshops on fair housing, student loan debt, consumer credit debt, and criminal record expungement through tabling, talking, and passing out flyers to faculty, staff, and students. Workshops are held monthly on each campus. Clinic attendees can speak to the staff member during and after workshops to learn more about how the law applies to their individual situations, and an MCJ attorney comes to each site once a month to provide free legal assistance. Outreach and information strategies have evolved over time to include conversations with several instructors who encourage their classes to attend, and coordinating with student services staff so that the MCJ staff member also occasionally presents to students attending workshops and meetings related to campus services or choosing a major. The Legal Clinic served 745 women at Holmes between fall 2014 and fall 2015 and provided direct legal counsel and advice or representation for 24 women.

745
Women were served
at the legal clinic at
Holmes between fall
2014 and fall 2015

Partners in Implementation

MCJ attorney and staff member Jessica Catchings’ experience with the Legal Clinic program highlights the fact that strong partnerships with community college personnel and word of mouth from supporters on campus telling others about the program are especially important for an organization that is not a part of the college system. For instance:

• A Holmes Community College’s Trek Center coordinator was designated by the college administration as the main contact for the MCJ Legal Clinic at the Goodman and Grenada campuses. The Trek Center provides workshops and assistance to students on topics such as academic goals, financial aid, college life, and career planning. During the first semester, the coordinator walked the MCJ staff member through the campuses so she could talk to students between classes. In the second semester, he invited her to present legal clinics in conjunction with a Trek Center workshop on choosing majors. MCJ and the coordinator found this to be mutually beneficial, as students who came with an interest in legal issues received important information on the academic process, and those who came to learn about selecting courses gained important legal information.

• After Ms. Catchings connected with a staff member at the Student Support Services program on Goodman Campus, staff began referring their students to the legal clinics and also invited Ms. Catchings to speak at a student meeting.

• After Ms. Catchings told her former professors at the Ridgeland campus about the Legal Clinic, they became champions of the program, advertising the workshops, encouraging their students to attend (sometimes with offers of bonus points for attending), and telling other instructors about the program.
ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

Since fall 2014, MCJ has been able to serve over 1,000 students, including 745 women, through the Legal Clinic. Some of the gains from the program will be realized in the future, when students facing legal issues are able to use what they learned at the workshops. As Ms. Catchings explains:

“You’re further ahead if you have the information before you need it. If you’ve already been exposed to what fair housing is or to what expungements are, or what the landlord is supposed to do in your apartment... If you already have some basic knowledge about that, you are better prepared for life. That’s half the battle, trying to figure out where to go when the issue comes up.”

There have also been several concrete accomplishments:

- **Participant Gains:** A total of 24 women received representation regarding student loan debt, consumer debt, landlord-tenant issues, and criminal record expungement. Solutions typically involved:

  - Resolving loan default issues to allow students to enroll in classes using federal student loans.
  - Lowering or eliminating federal student debt in appropriate cases.
  - Expunging criminal records — which often include record of arrests or charges without convictions or nonviolent crimes long past — to ensure that graduating students can obtain a job in their chosen field.

  Two additional students received referrals for help resolving family law matters to the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyer’s Project, which can assist single mothers in collecting child support or establishing child custody and help others to obtain a divorce.

- **Systems Change:** Many students and families struggle to understand and navigate the college financial aid process. MCJ was able to raise Holmes administrators’ awareness of the importance of assisting students with this process. As a result of MCJ’s efforts, Holmes implemented the Financial Aid Boot Camp 101 and 102 workshops, which include information about completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The workshops are now offered each semester.

- **Ripple Effects:** When the women who come to the Legal Clinic are able to overcome financial barriers to finishing college, expunge criminal records preventing them from getting good jobs, end unhealthy relationships, or secure child support, they are building economic security and more stable lives for their children and others who depend on them. When women who attend informational workshops later bring their friends to meet with MCJ staff, they are spreading information about rights and possible solutions to legal and financial challenges well beyond the original workshop attendees.
Fiona was a certified medical assistant and nursing assistant, but she was only able to get a job with one company that was willing to take a chance on someone with a criminal record. She was 28 years old and attending Holmes for prerequisites in physical therapy so she could apply to the medical school at the University of Mississippi when she found out about the MCJ Legal Clinic. After talking about her situation at a workshop one day, she was introduced to a lawyer who helped her through the process of expunging her record. With the cost of a typical legal appointment at about $500, Fiona could not have done it without the clinic. She explains, “The record I needed expunged was from 2007. I just had to do the legwork; the lawyer did all the paperwork in a timely manner and told me the filing fees (which can be as high as $150) were waived. If I get the expungement, I can get into the medical program at UMMC. They do a background check, and it would count against me if they see something on my record.”

She did get the expungement approved by a judge in the fall of 2015.

Fiona says being able to talk to a lawyer has helped her in other ways, too: “She’s given me all kinds of information, like about housing discrimination, credit issues, and other topics. If I’d known all this years ago, I would have fixed my credit as well.” She continues, “I feel better informed about my life. I was allowing my record to hold me back.”

The student’s name in the above account has been changed in order to protect her privacy.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

- **Building Sustainability:** Ms. Catchings developed a good relationship with student support staff and informed them that if they wanted her to return to speak to their students after the grant period ends, she would.

- **Replication:** MCJ is applying for a Women’s Foundation grant to bring the Legal Clinic project to another site. MCJ is producing a video about the project, which will describe the program and include participants’ stories. The video will be shared with the Women’s Foundation and will become an educational resource for MCJ.

In addition, MCJ has responded to interest from Coahoma Community College (CCC), whose staff learned about the Legal Clinic at a Women’s Foundation grantee gathering in October 2014. MCJ has led two workshops at CCC, with over 200 students in attendance. CCC administrators made all arrangements, including promoting the sessions and handling flyer distribution, advertising, and student recruitment.
LESSON TO SHARE

RECRUITMENT

Be persistent in seeking opportunities to improve outreach.

Outreach strategies to inform students about the Legal Clinic’s services evolved over the course of the pilot year. At first, primary outreach consisted of staffing a table with brochures, supplemented occasionally by the Trek coordinator walking with the MCJ staff member through campus to speak directly with students who were between classes. In time, the MCJ staff member received permission to walk on her own, and she found that engaging in conversations with students and college personnel (for instance, in and around the library where her table was set up) and distributing clinic brochures was often more effective than just tabling in a single location on each campus. Although she was not permitted to post flyers or speak to classes, faculty who were informed of the program spread the word, resulting in more students attending the legal clinics and an increase from four students receiving individual legal counseling in the first semester to a total of 33 by the end of the first calendar year (fall 2014 and spring, summer, and fall 2015).

FORGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CAMPUS PERSONNEL

Learn about the scheduling, events, and other nuances of student life on each campus in order to have the best chance of being accessible to students.

MCJ needed to change workshop times more than once during the semester after learning that students would not be on campus on particular afternoons (e.g., due to football games on one campus or no school the following day on another campus, resulting in students leaving early the day before when the presentation was scheduled). A good relationship with campus personnel is indispensable for learning about these details of the culture on each campus.

“A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH CAMPUS PERSONNEL IS INDISPENSABLE FOR LEARNING ABOUT THE DETAILS OF THE CULTURE ON EACH CAMPUS.”

“I’M PROUD OF THE WORK THAT WE WERE ABLE TO DO. ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES IS REALLY A PROBLEM FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE. THERE ARE A LOT OF LAWYERS, BUT KNOWING WHICH ONE TO CALL AND NOT BEING CHARGED A FEE TO ASK A QUESTION IS A MAJOR DEAL.”

– JESSICA CATCHINGS, MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE ATTORNEY
Through its Access to Opportunity grant program, the Women’s Foundation of Mississippi has funded four model approaches aimed at significantly increasing graduation and overall success rates for the high number of low-income women in the state who enroll in community college.
KEY FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES:

Women are achieving results.
Collectively, the four programs reached more than 975 women in their first year. Their achievements include, but are not limited to: developing new job-related skills, such as résumé writing and interviewing; increasing their self-confidence and optimism about their ability to reach their goals; persisting in school; improving their GPAs; getting on the president’s and dean’s lists; graduating from college; and obtaining jobs.

Partners are essential.
All four models’ achievements rest in large part on the engagement of various college- and community-based partners. At their best, these gatekeepers help to remove barriers and introduce new policies and practices that facilitate women’s success on campus.

College practices and policies are changing to better facilitate female students’ success.
All four of the models not only provide direct support to women; but they also look for ways to create college environments — through policies and practices — that are more conducive to women’s engagement and success. Several new practices have been implemented so far. For example, after hearing from students about their difficulty accessing the campus, Coahoma Community College introduced a new bus route. At Jones County Junior College, increased awareness of student needs led financial aid staff to be more open to working with a woman to see whether she can obtain federal financial aid for her situation and, if not, to referring her to the Women’s Emergency Fund. Holmes Community College instituted Financial Aid Boot Camp 101 and 102 workshops in response to Mississippi Center for Justice’s efforts to raise campus administrators’ awareness of the importance of assisting students in navigating this challenging process. At East Mississippi Community College, it is likely that administration, which is very supportive of the EMPOWR program, will implement changes in coming semesters based on their new awareness of the struggles nontraditional women students face.

THE WOMEN’S FOUNDATION REMAINS COMMITTED TO CONTINUING ITS SUPPORT OF INCREASING GRADUATION AND OVERALL SUCCESS RATES FOR LOW-INCOME WOMEN IN MISSISSIPPI. WFM INTENDS TO SHARE THE FINDINGS FROM THIS CASE STUDY WITH OTHER COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN THE STATE, WITH AN EYE TO REPLICATING THESE AND OTHER MODELS IN THE YEARS AHEAD.

| Women Accessed Opportunity Program or Service | 975+ |
| Financial literacy and asset building | 746+ |
| Job training and placement | 93 |
| Leadership development and mentoring | 59 |
| Benefits and work supports (emergency financial assistance) | 43 |
| Education, credential, and degrees (academic support/tutoring) | 34 |
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The case studies in this report were developed for the Women’s Foundation of Mississippi by Korwin Consulting based on a review of interim and final grantee reports (March and November 2015), 30–60-minute evaluation interviews conducted with key informants at each grantee site in August and December 2015, and communications with Foundation staff throughout 2015. Key informants were given a draft of their site’s case study to review in January 2016 in order to confirm accuracy.

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ROLANDA BROWN, PHD, Dean of Academic Affairs, Coahoma Community College

PAM BROWNLEE, Women’s Emergency Fund Project Manager, Jones County Junior College

ANNE BUFFINGTON, Lead Researcher, Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center

MICHAEL COLE, Emergency Technology Instructor and Women’s Emergency Fund Grant Manager, Jones County Junior College

JESSICA CATCHINGS, Attorney, Mississippi Center for Justice

LATISHA LATIKER, Program Officer, Women’s Foundation of Mississippi

OLGER TWYNER, III, Development Director, Mississippi Center for Justice

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Korwin Consulting, an evaluation and planning firm, advances social justice solutions by identifying community strengths, building organizational capacity, and evaluating impact. More information on Korwin Consulting is available at www.korwinconsulting.com.

Lisa Korwin, Principal
Robin Horner, Evaluation Manager