Submitted To:
The Women’s Foundation of Mississippi

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“This Program has shown me that others go through problems as well as myself. And there is a way to deal with it. EMPOWR has gave me the confidence to know that I [am] human, and mistakes can be fixed.”

–Program Participant

Introduction
Mississippi currently faces some of the most concerning employment and education trends in the country. The state has the highest poverty rate, the fifth highest unemployment rate, and the second highest rate of people without high school diplomas in the country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; U.S. Census, 2012). Much of the poverty and unemployment in the region can be directly attributed to limited educational attainment. In 2010, the percentage of working age adults (between the ages of 25 and 64) in Mississippi with an associate’s degree or higher was 29.9 percent (Lumina Foundation, 2015). This combination of factors creates a disadvantage that is difficult for many residents to overcome.

It can be particularly difficult for women to achieve educational attainment and financial success. A recent study revealed that 44 percent of women attending community college in Mississippi are employed, and 31 percent have children (Hess, Reichlin, Roman & Gault, 2014). Dickey (1996) cites findings that women, especially female students of color, experience the greatest sense of isolation in higher education. Given these multiple demands and sense of isolation, it can be challenging for women to stay enrolled in community college and to complete their education in a traditional manner.

Research suggests that additional supports for female college attendees, including peer interaction, can promote retention and school success by enhancing social integration (The Center for Global Education, 2014). Citing numerous academic studies by Tinto and other retention scholars, the Center for Global Education (2014) points to the importance of positive and emotionally supportive social relationships through peer group interactions and reports that engagement in school life can increase satisfaction with the college experience.

Mentors can also play an important role in lending needed social capital to students at risk of dropping out, promoting self-esteem and ensuring that students have a sense of belonging and identify with their school (Center for Global Education, 2014). Howard and Smith-Goodwin (2010) report that both mentees and mentors benefit from increased communication and social integration, as well as higher rates of retention, in student-to-student mentoring.
Previous Research

To investigate the needs of female community college students, the Women’s Foundation of Mississippi commissioned researchers at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center (SSRC) in 2013 to conduct focus groups on six of the state’s fifteen community college campuses. The purpose of the study was to gather input from female students regarding the challenges they encounter when attempting to advance their education. The focus groups enabled researchers to capture the viewpoints of participants and to identify specific issues that serve as stressors. One of the key topics that arose was a need for school-based mentors to help students navigate the school environment and foster a greater sense of support and connection (Ragsdale & Buffington, 2014).

During the focus groups, one participant stated that nontraditional female students need support from others who have had similar experiences “to know you’re not the only one in that situation.” Another said having a mentor would provide a setting where “you can...tell your true feelings.” One participant envisioned a program “where you can...just have an open thing where women can come and talk about their problems...It’s really helpful to get other people’s opinions. A women’s support group.” Focus group participants felt a supportive setting where like-minded women could partner to advise and support one another during their community college experience would not only be beneficial to the mentee but also to the mentor. Further, participants expressed a desire for their needs to be heard by the school administration. One group member commented, “[I would like the administration] to come in and listen to us like you’re doing. Come in and listen to the group because each one of us is bringing a different angle out. They need to hear that.”

Current Study

Considering this desire for an expanded support system expressed among the focus group members, as well as evidence of the effectiveness of peer mentoring in the literature, a peer mentoring program for nontraditional female students was conceived by SSRC staff. This program was funded by the Women’s Foundation of Mississippi, and to host the program, SSRC staff partnered with nearby East Mississippi Community College (EMCC), Golden Triangle campus, from which many students matriculate to Mississippi State University.

The Empowering Mentors to Promote Women’s Retention (EMPOWR) program was a pilot project that sought to increase the social integration and engagement, and ultimately retention, of nontraditional female students attending EMCC through a peer mentoring program, augmented with interactive speaker sessions where students learned more about available student services, career planning, financial aid, health, and relationship management. Additionally, student comments regarding needed school supports were summarized to be confidentially conveyed to school administration, in order to create a policy-related organizational feedback loop.

The specific goals of the project included the following:

- Create a tested and sustainable student retention program for nontraditional female students attending community college
- Increase student success and completion through enhanced student support
- Enhance student knowledge regarding career, personal, and financial aid options
- Develop a platform for systems and institutional change through an organizational feedback loop between students and administration
Methods

The steps to accomplish these goals included the following:

Participant Recruitment: The target population for the EMPOWR Program was nontraditional (aged 22+) women attending community college at EMCC. In order to identify students most at risk of dropping out of college among this group EMCC staff utilized data collected through the DropGuard Early Alert System, through which instructors provide input about student behavior (absences, poor test grades, etc.). The mentee group (12 freshmen) and a freshman control group (12 students) were recruited in December 2014 and January 2015 using these indicators. The mentor group (12 sophomores) and a sophomore control group (12 students) were recruited during this time by identifying sophomore students who, in their freshman year, showed signs of difficulty through the DropGuard Early Alert System, but who persisted in their school enrollment. The mentors were also asked to complete an application. This recruitment design allowed the group of sophomores who struggled, but managed to persevere, lend assistance to the currently struggling freshman. Participants were offered gift cards for their participation in this pilot research project. The final sample of participants was 47.9% Black, 46% White, 2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2% Asian. Sixty-three percent reported being ages 21-30; 15% were ages 31-40; 17% were 41-50; and 4% were over 50.

Survey administration: A pre/post-survey instrument was developed and administered to participants, as well as control groups, before the program began and after it concluded, in order to measure progress toward program objectives, as follows:

- Reported awareness and use of school services, including student and career planning services, financial aid, and health services
- Self-reported communication, relationship, and coping skills, as well as self-esteem
- School engagement and satisfaction
- Desire and expectation for school completion
- Social and academic integration and support

Mentor Training: A two-hour training session to address mentor expectations, boundaries, and program content was held. During this training, mentors engaged in interactive activities designed to foster listening skills, create a sense of identification with others, explore what it does and doesn’t mean to be a mentor, and set the overall tone for the program.

Mentor-Mentee Matching at a Kick-off Event: A kick-off event was held in January 2015 to introduce the matches to one another. The event offered refreshments and featured local speakers to generate enthusiasm for the program and the power of mentoring.

Logged Mentoring Sessions: Matches were expected to meet for at least one hour three times a month over the spring semester. The sessions were to be held on campus unless participants required other arrangements. The content of mentoring sessions included discussion of general personal issues, rather than specific academic subject matter tutoring. Mentors encountering mentees with academic problems were encouraged to direct them to school tutoring services. Matches logged the sessions with EMCC staff to document the meetings.

Monthly Interactive Speaker Sessions and Interactive Discussions: Five sets of speakers met with participants over the course of the semester, addressing the topics of strong relationships, stress management, personal health and wellness, personal finance, and career counseling. Following the speaker presentations, interactive discussion sessions were held to gauge student needs and concerns regarding the speaker topics.
End of the Year Celebration and Acknowledgements: A banquet was held for participants to thank them and to celebrate their accomplishments over the course of the semester. Mentors and mentees brought guests to the dinner, where certificates of program completion were presented.

**Findings**

**Qualitative Results**

Mentors and mentees were asked four open-ended questions at the completion of the post-survey designed to obtain more in-depth perspectives of their views regarding the impact of the EMPOWR program. Both groups were asked to describe what the program meant to them, what aspects of the program were personally most helpful, how the program could be improved, and to provide any closing comments they wished to share. Additionally, the mentors were asked to describe how their college experiences might have changed if they had had access to EMPOWR as freshmen.

Mentees and mentors both expressed feelings of loneliness and stress during their freshman year and indicated that participation in the EMPOWR program had eased some of their anxieties. Being matched with women who had experienced similar feelings of isolation and stress during their freshman year gave mentees a sense of belonging and encouragement. Several mentees said they did not feel as lonely once they established relationships with their mentors:

- *It [EMPOWR] has given me a lot of info that I can apply to my personal life. It is also good that I have someone I can talk to.*
- *This program was a great outlet to discuss the stress that I was experiencing.*
- *It felt great being amongst other women who were somewhat dealing with some of the same things I was going through. I knew I wasn’t alone.*
- *This program really helped me a lot to be able to talk out problems and stress with other people that are going through the same things in school.*
- *The mentor/mentee relationship made me feel more supported at the school.*
- *Thank you for connecting me to other women in my situation. I’ve learned and grown and fellowshipped with them!*

The feelings of loneliness and isolation were not limited to mentees. One mentor said if she had had access to EMPOWR during her freshman year, she “would not have felt so displaced and alone,” while another indicated, “I would not have felt so lonely.” Others believed having EMPOWR during their freshman year could have more positively impacted their academic and career goals:

- *I probably wouldn’t have wasted so much time and would have completed my degree on time. I would have had support and understanding and assistance with mentoring.*
I think it would have helped me stay optimistic on my courses and grounded as well. Having someone there to talk to and guide me would have been fantastic.

It may have changed my mind frame on opening up to others.

I might have made better choices and better grades!

The leadership role gave some mentors a sense of belonging as well as empowerment. “I feel I have gained some self-esteem and belief in myself,” said one mentor. Others indicated that serving in a leadership position had helped them to gain confidence:

It gave me the opportunity to grow by helping others and ourselves.

The program helped me to connect to a person different from me. Also it helped me to become more focused.

I’ve learned things about myself, ways I can improve. I also made a friend!

The five interactive sessions held on the EMCC Golden Triangle campus were also avenues for mentors and mentees to strengthen their relationships with one another while being informed on topics of interest. The informal gatherings offered participants a place to interact with each other in a non-judgmental environment. “It was like a sisterhood,” said one mentee. Another acknowledged that the ability to talk during the breakfasts and lunches which were strategically planned around the sessions allowed her to “ask questions that I may have been concerned about, as well as learning more about others.” Of the topics covered during the sessions, the majority of the respondents indicated that the financial planning session was the most beneficial to them, and several indicated they wished there had been more time to discuss. One mentor indicated that the information on financial and career planning had been very helpful to her, adding “I can see my career path clearer now.”

Another common theme among respondents was the development of true friendships that emerged from the one-on-one relationships but also from the interactive sessions and gatherings. Many said their friendships would continue after the official end of EMPOWR. One mentor said her mentee had become like “extended family” and that “her smile or unexpected text always makes me smile.” Another said she found “great joy in conversing with her [mentee] almost daily.” In expressing the most helpful aspects of EMPOWR, one mentee replied the classes and her mentor and added, “I think we will be friends outside this program.” Respondents also provided suggestions on ways to improve the EMPOWR program. One common theme among the mentors and mentees revolved around the recruitment process. In particular, one respondent suggested some kind of “social” could be held to increase awareness of the program and generate excitement among students. Another said that information about the program and the services it provides should be listed on the school website. Focusing on recruitment early in the school year was another suggestion. To prevent attrition, several respondents believed there should be more effort placed on the compatibility of the mentors and mentees. Although one mentee said the program was “great,” she added that program staff “should make sure that the people that are paired if they don’t meet or at least talk, they could find another person.” One mentor said that the mentee and mentor selection process should be “screened better for compatibility.” One interesting comment came from a mentor who never met her mentee:

Even though my mentee never showed up, it still let me know that we as people do have problems, but it is ALWAYS a good thing to have someone to talk to when we are going through, instead of pushing people away.
With regard to the interactive sessions, one respondent replied that the particular subject matter to be discussed could be determined by polling participants through “an anonymous vote.” Another believed that “hands-on group projects” could serve as motivation to participate, and another suggested that a gathering away from campus could help with recruitment.

Overall, the responses to the qualitative questions were extremely positive from both the mentors and mentees. One mentee said she would “definitely like to be a part of another one,” while another, in expressing her approval of EMPOWR, said she “looked forward to seeing it grow.” When asked what the program has meant, one mentor replied, “It has allowed me to help someone on this difficult journey. I’d participate each semester if I could.”

Qualitative Data was also collected during the discussions that followed the interactive sessions. During these discussions, participants provided feedback on the topics and made recommendations for ways the EMCC administration could improve conditions for nontraditional female community college students, given the challenges they face. For a summary of the sessions and the feedback provided to EMCC, please see Appendix A.

**Quantitative Results**

The quantitative portion of the survey asked respondents to choose responses from a Likert scale on a variety of questions measuring success toward project goals. The following tables show the mean scores for the pre-tests and the post-tests for both the participant and control groups resulting from split plot ANOVA analyses. They also show the percentage difference in the pre- and post-tests for each group, which indicates whether or not the participant group made greater strides toward the goal than the control group.

For each table, the questions are scored on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing the best, or worst, possible outcome, depending on question wording. Therefore, the direction of the scoring is noted on each table. Regarding significance, attrition from a starting number of 12 mentees down to 6 over the course of the program decreased the likelihood of reporting significant findings. However, several questions still revealed significant differences between the groups, suggesting very strong findings should the sample size be increased in the future.

Significant Findings, as noted by †Marginally significant, p < .10; *Significant, p < .05; **Strongly significant, p < .01:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Satisfaction with overall social life on campus (1= Very satisfied)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant Group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control Group</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The finding that participants were more likely to report greater satisfaction with overall social life on campus than control group members was strongly significant.
Participants were significantly more likely to report that their interactions with other students had an impact on their intellectual growth, attitudes, and values than control group members.

Table 2. How much have your interactions with other students had an impact on your intellectual growth, attitudes and values? (1= Very much)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The finding that participants were more likely to report that their interactions with other students had an impact on their personal growth, attitudes, and values than control group members was marginally significant.

Table 3. How much have your interactions with other students had an impact on your personal growth, attitudes and values? (1= Very much)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The finding that control group members were more likely to report forgetting important academic responsibilities than participants was marginally significant.

Table 4. College Students have many academic responsibilities. How often do you forget those that you regard important? (1= Very often)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The finding that participants reported they were more likely to understand instructors in the classroom than control group members was marginally significant.

Table 5. Understand instructors when they lecture or ask students to answer questions in class (1= Very well)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, however, participants showed greater variation in their reported enthusiasm for doing academic tasks than control group members. The finding that participants reported less enthusiasm at the end of the semester than control group members was marginally significant. Again, given the small sample size, marginally significant findings should be interpreted with caution. Additional research with a greater number of participants is needed to confirm these results.

Table 6. How enthused are you about doing academic tasks? (1= Very enthused)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Non-significant Findings:**

Participants showed non-significant gains, or in some cases, fewer losses, over control group members in the following areas. Again, a larger sample size would permit a more accurate testing of gains on each of these items since the effect has to be quite large to register significance with a small number of participants, and it is likely that even control group members become more acclimated to the school environment over the course of the semester.

- Interest in class
- Satisfaction with the quality of instruction
- Feeling that faculty was concerned with their intellectual growth
- Familiarity with support services
- Feeling the school is meeting their needs
- Feeling they have an opportunity to provide input on school matters
- A sense of connectedness with others on campus
- Feeling college-related stress
- Feeling they are a person of worth, on par with others
- Feeling they have much to be proud of
- Missing class for reasons other than illness
- Commitment to obtaining a 4-year college degree

For a few survey items, control group members outperformed participants. These included turning in late assignments and feeling they have much in common with other students. These findings are uncharacteristic of the majority of survey results, needing further research with a larger sample size to explain them.

Mentees completing both the pre- and post-tests also reported the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Test Responses</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>My peer mentor provided me with useful information</em></td>
<td>80% (4)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My peer mentor demonstrated concern about my academic success</em></td>
<td>80% (4)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My peer mentor was knowledgeable about EMCC resources</em></td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My peer mentor helped me adjust socially</em></td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My peer mentor helped me cope with stress</em></td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion
This pilot mentoring project successfully created a program for community college students that included peer mentoring and interactive discussion sessions addressing the needs of nontraditional female students. However, lessons were learned:

- Program attrition can be attenuated by a more thorough recruitment and matching process:
  - The recruitment process should begin with the faculty and staff council meetings to garner interest, as well as meetings with the EMCC administration. EMPOWR staff and alumnae could provide presentations prior to the beginning of school.
  - The selection process should be revamped to broaden opportunities for women students to participate. The early alert system can still be used to identify potential participants, but the accepted GPA limit should be increased.
  - An interview with the EMPOWR staff should be required to ensure that applicants are interested and capable of participating in the program.
  - EMPOWR staff can work with EMCC Public Affairs office to promote the program during the year, giving it more recognition on campus and helping with future recruiting.
  - The mentor/mentee match process needs to be fine-tuned. EMPOWR staff should spend time looking at applications to make the best possible pairings. Furthermore, mentors/mentees should be formally allowed to meet off campus as their schedules permit to ensure greater flexibility.

- Program results can be more informative:
  - Future studies should anticipate attrition and recruit more participants, so the final sample size is large enough to detect moderate program effects.
  - Survey instruments should be trimmed in scope to focus primarily on findings expected from a peer mentoring program, rather than focusing more broadly on indicators of school persistence.

Despite the limitations of this pilot program, participants reported positive outcomes, particularly demonstrating greater satisfaction with campus social life and the impacts of other students on their intellectual growth, attitudes, and values. One of the key findings was the success of the interactive sessions in building camaraderie among the entire group of participants. As indicated by the qualitative responses, these activities fostered a sense of belonging even when the mentoring matches were not successful due to attrition. Not only providing important information on issues relevant to the women, they provided a platform for a sense of community and connectedness.

Future efforts should include an interactive session on unplanned pregnancy, given that several of the mentees who dropped out of the program had to leave school for this reason. Also, more promotion of the program among administration should occur, and additional efforts to ensure the program is sustainable should be made. Clearly, further programming and research is warranted, as the positive gains made through this project could serve to provide the social support and integration needed by nontraditional female students to persist in higher education and ultimately succeed personally and economically.
References


Appendix A: Interactive Sessions Report

January 30, 2015
EMPOWR Kick Off
Ann Carr
Senior Associate Athletic Director, Women’s Sports, Student Athlete Services, Mississippi State University
Andrea Myles
Program Officer, Stennis Center for Public Service

Mentors and mentees met for the first time during the EMPOWR Kick Off event. Participants got to know each other over breakfast followed by ice breakers that helped everyone to feel comfortable. Ann Carr, a senior level member of the MSU Athletic Department staff shared her personal story of being a single mother while pursuing a graduate degree and working full time in a male-dominated department. Ms. Carr emphasized the importance of developing lasting friendships with other women and shared that her friends supported her when she needed assistance. She gave the example of how her friends would be responsible for her young daughter when she would have to travel for work related purposes. Among her closest friends is Andrea Myles who also shared with the group the importance of making lasting relationships with other women. Both reminded the participants to recognize the strength of diversity. Ms. Carr and Ms. Myles said that friends do not have to be cookie cutter images of themselves and that friendships can be enhanced when differences are recognized and appreciated. A discussion followed in which many participants shared their difficulties in raising children by themselves or with limited family assistance.

February 27, 2015
Stress and Time Management
Dr. William Sansing
Sociology Instructor/East Mississippi Community College

Dr. Sansing queried participants about how stress can be helpful and harmful to a person’s overall well-being. This generated a lively discussion in which participants revealed some of their stressors and how they cope. Examples of stressors were balancing work, school and family, managing living in multi-generational households, and feeling that they were burdens to their parents. Many participants expressed that prayer and meditation are coping mechanisms they use to manage stress.

Following Dr. Sansing’s presentation, the conversation turned toward the role EMCC could play in alleviating stress on students. Many said that a high level of stress and frustration comes from the class registration process and overall orientation to the campus and campus life. EMCC does conduct an orientation session at the beginning of the school year, but attendance is not required. It was the opinion of many participants that students were not made aware of orientation opportunities and therefore felt lost in the process of acclimating themselves to college life. Suggestions for improvement centered on the need for more brochures and information about campus lay-out as well as the registration process. One suggestion was to provide a step-by-step flow chart for students during registration time. The Counseling and Distance Education Center is a resource for students, but participants noted that often there is no receptionist to help students sort out next steps related to their academic and career choices.

Communication with faculty was a common thread during the discussion. Participants felt that there was not a uniform mode of communication that often caused undue stress among students. One mentee commented
that instructors often were not available to discuss upcoming class assignments and that she had been told to consult peers instead. Another complaint was that because instructors had differing communication methods, there was often missed communication between instructors and students.

Because EMCC Golden Triangle is a commuter campus, students often do not have the opportunities to socialize with one another and with faculty. It was noted that the Pine Grove Festival, sponsored by the school, was an opportunity for students to come together and relax. Some suggested that more “stress-free,” fun days should be held on campus throughout the school year.

March 20, 2015
Managing Health and Wellness
Stephanie Gale
Family Nurse Practitioner, the Clinic at Elm Lake, Columbus, Mississippi

Ms. Gale presented information to the group regarding diabetes, high blood pressure, stress, and healthy weight along with hand-outs on each topic. Participants asked her personal health care matters related to the topics she had discussed with the group. The subject of stress and how to manage it was a focus of discussion. When asked how many participants felt stressed on a day-to-day basis, all but one raised her hand.

Ms. Gale had emphasized that a way to combat stress is through daily exercise. Since the EMCC Golden Triangle campus does not have a wellness facility, participants felt there was a need for administrators to seek ways to offer recreational and exercise opportunities at a low cost for the school and the students. One suggestion was to offer non-credit fitness courses, such as Zumba. Although there is a program on campus designed to encourage daily walking, participants did not consider it helpful because there were no incentives or group activities. Many of the participants were not familiar with the program at all. One participant suggested that the school solicit local sponsors to assist in the financial support of a couch to 5K program that could be promoted campus wide. Another suggestion was to partner with local hospitals, fitness centers, and even Mississippi State University’s Sanderson Center to provide low cost memberships to students at EMCC Golden Triangle.

With no student health center on campus, EMCC administrators must find creative ways to provide basic services to its students and faculty. An interesting idea emerged in the discussion in which nursing EMCC nursing students could provide services such as blood pressure and blood sugar checks for students while being supervised. It was suggested that the nursing students could make referrals to physicians for further evaluation.

April 10, 2015
Financial Management
Dr. Becky Smith, Assistant Extension Professor of Agricultural Economics and Director of the MSU Budget Bulldogs Mentoring Program
Susan Cosgrove, Financial Educator and MSU Extension Agent
Caitlin Dougherty, Vista Volunteer

The presentation covered such topics as budgeting, debt, financial behaviors, information sources, and goal setting. Multiple materials were distributed to participants. In addition, information regarding free tax preparation was provided. Participants engaged in dialogue with Dr. Smith and her colleagues as they moved through several financial literacy exercises.
In the discussion following: Participants expressed that they really enjoyed the presentation and found it helpful. They felt the material was presented in a nonjudgmental way. As for suggestions, participants noted that EMCC offers no personal finance class for students. Other suggestions included having more than one phone number for the financial aid dept., as it is difficult to connect with someone who can help you. Another suggestion was having, if not a full course, at least a seminar series on personal finance, such as the Lunch and Learn sessions. They recommend that Fridays are a good day to hold these. Some participants noted that they like the Higher One card because it texts you each time it is used and provides a 1-800 number to check its balance.

Discussions between EMPOWR coordinators and Dr. Smith are planned, with the hope of developing a more permanent relationship between EMCC and MSU regarding financial literacy programming.

April 17, 2015
Career Counseling
Yulanda Haddix
EMCC College to Career (C2C) Counselor, Workforce Services

Ms. Yulanda Haddix from the EMCC Counselor to Career Program (C2C) presented on career development. The C2C program works with individuals ages 17-24 to assist in workforce training and job placement. Ms. Haddix is also involved in a new program for SNAP recipients ages 22-45 that has the same goal. Her job is to recruit participants, mentor them and connect them with local businesses with whom she has established a relationship.

Ms. Haddix strongly encouraged participants to volunteer in the area in which they intend to work. She explained that this will build connections, open doors, and provide experience and an opportunity to see what the environment is like. She strongly encourages her mentees to know who they are and their own personality/work style and to recognize differences in others.

Ms. Haddix recommends that workers understand the amount of structure they need before they decide on a career path, as well as the hours per week they want to work. She discussed the responsibility that comes with having a career and handed out information on careers vs. jobs, along with other discussion materials.

In the following question and answer session, participants asked her if they could contact her for further advice and guidance, to which she agreed. They also asked her if she knew of particular volunteer opportunities, and it was suggested that participants connect with Volunteer Starkville and other local volunteer placement organizations that will provide training and connections. As for recommendations, Ms. Haddix is located at EMCC and is available to the students, so none were made.