

# AMPLIFYING WOMEN'S VOICES AND BUILDING SKILLS AT EAST MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The Empowering Mentors to Promote Women's Retention (EMPOWR) program is designed and run by the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University (MSU), located in Starkville, Mississippi. Studies show that women, especially women of color, suffer from isolation in higher education that can make completing college difficult, and that being matched with a mentor can increase self-esteem and a sense of belonging for students at risk of dropping out. Responding to this research and to findings from focus groups they conducted at several Mississippi community colleges in 2014, the MSU researchers developed the EMPOWR program, which combines peer mentoring and interactive speaker sessions to increase social integration, engagement, and retention of nontraditional female students, age 22 to 60.

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.

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## 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.

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“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

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## 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

### 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

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.

- **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.

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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."**

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*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.

**“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.”**

Program participant comment reported in the EMPOWR final evaluation report (July 2015)

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.