

I-BEST success in Miss.



Napoleon Miller, who recently completed the MI-BEST program at Hinds Community College, spoke about the program before Mississippi lawmakers. Photo: Hinds Community College/Cathy Hayden

BY DANNY BARRETT FEBRUARY 17, 2017

Napoleon Miller spent his childhood as a ward of the state of Mississippi, bouncing from home to home and school to school.

“I grew up in Mississippi’s foster care system,” Miller said. “I decided to stop going to high school and started Job Corps. When I got there, I started hanging out with the wrong people and I got kicked out.”

It’s a story with much happier present than past, however, thanks to an innovative program in Mississippi community colleges that’s creating more stories like Miller’s.

Miller, 35, worked odd jobs cutting yards and in foodservice before pursuing his GED at [Hinds Community College](#).

“When I was almost finished with my GED, my navigator told me about the MI-BEST program,” he said. “This was an opportunity for me to continue working on my GED and start training for a career.”

Sharing his story

Miller shared his story of success in the program with state lawmakers this week during a hearing on the program before the House Workforce Development Committee.

“I started to major in electrical technology, but then I found out that I would make more money and have more opportunity for work if I majored in industrial maintenance,” he told the

committee, referring to the expansive program at Hinds that combines an array of disciplines to prepare students for modern-day manufacturing equipment. Miller graduated in December with a career certificate and is working toward an Associate of Applied Science degree.

MI-BEST is Mississippi's version of the nationally recognized **Integrating Basic Education and Skills Training** program, or I-BEST, that originated in Washington state. The program kicked off a few years ago with federal funds and allows adult students to train for a job skill while simultaneously earning their GED high school equivalency certificate. In Mississippi, MI-BEST was implemented at each state community college this past fall thanks to a \$6 million grant from the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**.

Ready to work

Students are prepared to be job-ready in six months to a year, train in high-demand areas and earn national certifications.

At Hinds, program coordinators have worked closely with those in the burgeoning Industrial maintenance area of study, said David Creel, district director of manufacturing training.

"I work with industry to understand what their needs are, with career-tech deans to understand what the program provided them, and with our MI-BEST and adult basic education teams to get those students to get those basic skills, earn credentials, then go to work," Creel said.

The program's impact on the state's workforce is borne out in data on the skill level of working-age adults. Middle-skill jobs, which require training beyond high school but not a four-year degree, account for 58 percent of Mississippi's jobs. The MI-BEST program being implemented at all 15 community colleges in the state aims to close this skills gap.

"It's not uncommon in other states to hear employers say they have job offers available, but they don't have workers to fill them," said Brooke DeRenzis, state network director at **National Skills Coalition**.

DeRenzis told the committee Mississippi was one of 18 states with a version of I-BEST or a similar program in place to combat such gaps.

Why it works

Industries looking into the program's success rate to fill their job openings are diverse and span markets inside and outside the state, community college officials told committee members.

"We're fortunate to be able to offer this to our adult education students early on," said Scott Alsobrooks, vice president for economic and community development at **Pearl River Community College**. "Our geographical location really helps us, situated in the Pine Belt but we also cater to the New Orleans and Gulf Coast markets. So, we have recruiters that are petro-based, we have them coming from the shipbuilding market, and we also have the metal trades. The selling point to our students is having a lot of career opportunities."

Jesse Smith, president of **Jones County Junior College**, emphasized the program's success.

“The focus...is to go to the underprepared student who doesn't have a high school degree, and at the same time they're getting their high school equivalency, help them earn a workforce credential,” Smith said.