

Guest column: A pathway out of poverty

Jesse Smith and Andrea Mayfield, Guest Columnists

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Andrea Mayfield (Photo: Special to The Clarion-Ledger)
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Mississippi's economy rises and falls on its ability to put people to work in jobs that pay family-sustaining wages. Yet, one in five working-age (25-65 years old) adults in our state is a high school dropout. The unemployment rate for recent high school dropouts hovers at 30 percent and most certainly contributes to Mississippi's low workforce participation rate of 57 percent, the second lowest in the nation. Mississippi dropouts who do enter the workforce are typically destined to low skill, low wage jobs that offer little financial security.



Jesse Smith (Photo: Special to The Clarion-Ledger)

The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that Mississippi has the highest proportion of workers employed in jobs paying at or below the federal minimum wage. At the same time, there are nearly 40,000 jobs available, right now, in Mississippi for a middle-skill worker – someone with education beyond high school but not a four-year degree. Middle skill jobs are the largest part of Mississippi's labor market and key industries in Mississippi are unable to find these skilled workers.

Mississippi did not reach this dilemma overnight. Our state has too few skilled workers to support a robust economy. Standing in the middle-skill jobs gap are community colleges, higher education institutions grounded in access and affordability. Mississippi's 15 community colleges, supported by a three-year, \$6 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, have developed a pathway out of poverty for high school dropouts and other low-skilled adults.

The MIBEST (Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) program combines high school equivalency preparation, for-credit skills training, and industry-based credentials with intensive support in a concurrent program that accelerates credential attainment and employment in middle skill occupations in manufacturing, health care, information technology and other in-demand career areas.

Mississippi is now one of 18 states in the nation to have this type of program, which is offered to students at no cost or minimum cost. MIBEST is a proven model for taking an

individual who is dependent upon public assistance to an employed worker contributing to Mississippi's tax base.

The MIBEST program has already enrolled more than 1,200 students in approximately 60 career pathway programs. After just two semesters, 207 students have earned their high school equivalency and earned more than 1,000 industry relevant credentials. Fundamental to the program is intensive support services that help students overcome barriers, including childcare, transportation, housing, finances and food insecurities. Thirty-eight percent of MIBEST students are first-generation college students in their families.

One of the students who has taken advantage of the MIBEST program is Napoleon Miller.

"I grew up in Mississippi's foster care system," said Miller, 35, of Jackson, worked odd jobs cutting yards and in food service before pursuing his GED at Hinds Community College. "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."

"I found out that I would make more money and have more opportunity for work if I majored in Industrial Maintenance," he told a committee of state lawmakers in February during a hearing on the topic, referring to the expansive program at Hinds which combines an array of disciplines to prepare students for modern-day manufacturing equipment. He graduated in December 2016 with a career certificate and is working toward an Associate of Applied Science degree from Hinds

The Kellogg Foundation grant is set to expire in 2018; therefore, sustainable funding for MIBEST is needed. The Mississippi House of Representatives has introduced and unanimously passed HB 1615, the MIBEST Tax Credit, that allows Mississippians to receive a tax credit for contributions made to support the MIBEST program. MIBEST contributions are made to non-profit entities approved by the Mississippi Community College Board. This legislation has been transmitted to the Senate.

The community college system recognizes the budget reality that our state is currently facing. In the five budget reductions Governor Phil Bryant has been forced to make in FY 2016 and FY 2017, our institutions have been cut nearly \$16.75 million. HB 1615 provides an alternative funding stream for the MIBEST program that will have a minimal impact on the state's General Fund. The amount of tax credits is capped at \$10 million in 2017, \$12 million in 2018 and \$15 million in 2019 and beyond. These funds will help pay the cost for a program that will benefit the state many times over.

The main funding source of the program is set to expire in 18 months, and we are in need of a dedicated revenue stream. HB 1615 will provide the funds necessary for the MIBEST program, while having a minimal impact on the state's general fund. And that is a win for all of Mississippi.

Jesse Smith is currently serving as chair of the Mississippi Association of Community and Junior Colleges, an association comprised of the 15 community and junior colleges in Mississippi. He is also the president of Jones County Junior College.

Andrea Mayfield is the executive director of the Mississippi Community College Board.