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*University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*

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THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS IMPACTING A WORKFORCE  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN AN IMPOVERISHED COMMUNITY

By Elena Bauer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

University, Mississippi  
May 2017

Approved:

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Advisor: Dr. Albert Nylander

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Reader: Dr. Mark Bing

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Reader: Dr. Dwight Frink

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ELENA BAUER: The Sociological and Economic Factors Impacting a Workforce Development Program in an Impoverished Community**

The purpose of this study is to inform about the best practices of workforce development, and to consider the sociological and economic factors in impoverished areas that are to be considered for successful traditional business principles to work. Through an in-depth study of eight African American male respondents who were participants in a job training program in Clarksdale, Mississippi, this study explores the impact of the vestiges of past discrimination embedded in the institutions and culture to make a Mississippi community particularly challenging for providing equitable opportunities for low income residents (Cobb, 1992; Duncan & Blackwell, 2014; Myers Asch, 2011).

In this analytical case study of the Meraki Job Training Program, I describe the day-to-day realities of survival for underprivileged male youth ages 17-26 living in Clarksdale. Interviews with the participants in the program were conducted over a year-long period. Findings demonstrate that job training programs operating in regions with persistent and deep poverty must consider strategies beyond the traditional workforce development techniques to have success. In addition to the traditional economic challenges such as the lack of transportation, housing, affordable childcare, there were sociological factors like the social normative beliefs of learned helplessness and failure that were prominent in the community. Research also shows that building strong and functional social infrastructures, such as having a strong effective leadership structure in a community to develop networks and resources for residents, are critical for community development (Brown & Nylander, 1998; Brown, Nylander, King, & Lough, 2000). Therefore secondary data (n=335) were utilized on Delta leaders' perceptions of poverty and workforce

development throughout the Mississippi Delta Region to explore their beliefs regarding these inhibiting factors.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

An assumption of how to get out of poverty is that working harder, with more determination, will eventually create the necessary economic wealth to move out of impoverished conditions. This study suggests that determination alone will not be sufficient to avail against the forces of poverty. Transitional and supplementary support programs such as job training programs, after school programs, and professional training programs have come alongside impoverished communities to create advancement opportunities. However the expectation remains that if the opportunity was within arm's reach then surely people would mobilize themselves out of poverty. But what if that assumption is flawed? What if the supplemental and transitional support necessary for change is also equally about one's human agency as well as structural factors?

The purpose of this study is to inform about the best practices of workforce development, and to consider the sociological and economic factors in impoverished areas that are to be considered for successful traditional business principles to work. These practices will be identified through an analysis of a workforce development job training program in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Through a better understanding of these micro-level factors, this study will analyze the challenges encountered in the job training program and offer recommendations for improving workforce development programs in a highly stressed region. These recommendations provide opportunities for positive social change for the Mississippi Delta and its future workforce development strategies.

Although the overall understanding of the harshness and helplessness that people experience in poverty is universally acknowledged, how that reality impacts an individual's motivation and determination to "get out" of poverty needs more examination. The impact is not



easily quantified. This thesis takes an analytical case study approach of a community workforce development program in the Mississippi Delta to consider what factors impacted those trying to create the necessary economic wealth to move out of their impoverished community. This approach will be informed through my personal experience leading a job-training program for underprivileged male youth in Clarksdale, and my continued engagement with this program as a part of my Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CEED) work with the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement at the University of Mississippi. Additionally supplementary data are utilized on perceptions of poverty and workforce development collected by the McLean Institute.

Clarksdale, Mississippi is the “crossroads of culture and quirkiness with a heavy dose of blues” according to its tourism committee (Coahoma County Tourism, 2017). However the community has also become “a place of stunning divides and dramatically disparate life expectations between the rich and poor” (Abramsky, 2015). This division is grounded to a great extent in historical racist institutions beginning with slavery (Cobb, 1992). The hallmarks of the ensuing Jim Crow era are progressively phasing out of communities in the Delta, but a reluctance to pivot from divided institutions and a mentality that once defined the region still lingers. And that reluctance is captured acutely in Clarksdale (Hamlin, 2012).

Other important factors that have contributed to the market destabilization of Clarksdale and the Mississippi Delta are the decline of jobs in the labor and agricultural industries. The exploitable labor force needed in the agricultural industry declined after the end of sharecropping, with the resulting depopulation of the Delta (see Table 1). Furthermore as the agricultural industry continued to mechanize, the need for labor continued to decrease. Since the 1980s and 1990s, outmigration of whites in many communities throughout the Delta has created

negative consequences for the local economies, with the departure of wealth leading to a reduction in taxes that help to fund local social services. The limited educational and economic opportunities have contributed further to the population losses in these communities, which has made it more difficult for local businesses to remain in operation with the reduced cash flow.

Green et al. (2014) found that in the case of education and workforce development:

“That attending to the cultivation of people’s motivations and aspirations combined with an identification and reduction of the structural barriers that prevent the realization of these goals, led to positive impacts on individual, household, and community wellbeing.... Livelihood development for improved wellbeing requires attention to individuals’ motivations and aspirations combined with exposing and addressing the procedural and structural barriers that people face in their everyday lives. More focus is needed on opening opportunity pathways, particularly in areas where youth and young adults have historically had to leave a region in order to pursue their aspirations.”

(Kerstetter, Green, & Phillips, 2014, p 267).

Clarksdale has experienced an exodus of the white population since 1970, with approximately 65% of its white population departing (see Table 2). What remains is a community determined to change while trapped in a sense of indifference, with a significant portion of people living below the poverty line, and seemingly stuck in a cycle of poverty (Hamlin, 2014). A small segment of the community remains wealthy and tends to inhabit the outskirts of the community. Community partners and initiatives are located in the city where community programs serve a variety of needs ranging from maternal care and early childhood development to high school arts programs, to professional trade schools and community college scholarship

| Table 1: Mississippi Delta Counties |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| County                              | Population     |                |                |                |                |                |                | % Change       |                |
|                                     | 1940           | 1950           | 1960           | 1970           | 1980           | 1990           | 2000           | 2010           | 1940-2010      |
| Bolivar                             | 67,574         | 63,004         | 54,464         | 49,409         | 45,965         | 41,875         | 40,633         | 34,145         | -49.47%        |
| Coahoma                             | 48,333         | 49,361         | 46,212         | 40,447         | 36,918         | 31,665         | 30,622         | 26,151         | -45.89%        |
| Humphreys                           | 26,257         | 23,115         | 19,093         | 14,601         | 13,931         | 12,134         | 11,206         | 9,375          | -64.30%        |
| Issaquena                           | 6,433          | 4,966          | 3,576          | 2,737          | 2,513          | 1,909          | 2,274          | 1,406          | -78.14%        |
| Leflore                             | 53,406         | 51,813         | 47,142         | 42,111         | 41,525         | 37,341         | 37,947         | 32,317         | -39.49%        |
| Quitman                             | 27,191         | 25,885         | 21,019         | 15,888         | 12,636         | 10,490         | 10,117         | 8,223          | -69.76%        |
| Sharkey                             | 15,433         | 12,903         | 10,738         | 8,937          | 7,964          | 7,066          | 6,580          | 4,916          | -68.15%        |
| Sunflower                           | 61,007         | 56,031         | 45,750         | 37,047         | 34,844         | 32,867         | 34,369         | 29,450         | -51.73%        |
| Tallahatchie                        | 34,166         | 30,486         | 24,081         | 19,338         | 17,157         | 15,210         | 14,903         | 15,378         | -54.99%        |
| Tunica                              | 22,610         | 21,664         | 16,826         | 11,854         | 9,652          | 8,164          | 9,227          | 10,778         | -52.33%        |
| Washington                          | 67,576         | 70,504         | 78,683         | 70,581         | 72,344         | 67,935         | 62,977         | 51,137         | -24.33%        |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>429,986</b> | <b>409,732</b> | <b>367,584</b> | <b>312,950</b> | <b>295,449</b> | <b>266,656</b> | <b>260,855</b> | <b>223,276</b> | <b>-48.07%</b> |
| Mississippi                         | 2,183,796      | 2,178,914      | 2,178,141      | 2,216,994      | 2,520,638      | 2,573,216      | 2,844,666      | 2,967,297      | 35.88%         |
| United States                       | 132,164,569    | 151,325,798    | 179,323,175    | 203,211,912    | 226,545,805    | 248,709,873    | 281,421,906    | 308,745,538    | 133.61%        |
| Mississippi Delta Counties by Race  |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| County                              | Population     |                |                |                |                |                |                | % Change       |                |
|                                     | 1940           | 1950           | 1960           | 1970           | 1980           | 1990           | 2000           | 2010           | 1940-2010      |
| <b>Bolivar</b>                      |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 18,070         | 19,868         | 17,521         | 18,750         | 16,986         | 15,259         | 13,507         | 11,446         | -36.66%        |
| Black                               | 49,321         | 42,935         | 36,663         | 30,338         | 28,567         | 26,326         | 26,458         | 21,920         | -55.56%        |
| <b>Coahoma</b>                      |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 10,991         | 13,702         | 14,630         | 14,232         | 13,074         | 11,001         | 8,965          | 5,989          | -45.51%        |
| Black                               | 37,267         | 35,531         | 31,440         | 26,013         | 23,631         | 20,454         | 21,192         | 19,752         | -47.00%        |
| <b>Humphreys</b>                    |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 6,958          | 7,013          | 5,758          | 5,089          | 4,718          | 3,856          | 3,045          | 2,203          | -68.34%        |
| Black                               | 19,261         | 16,066         | 13,300         | 9,460          | 9,145          | 8,222          | 8,013          | 6,987          | -63.72%        |
| <b>Issaquena</b>                    |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 1,228          | 1,617          | 1,176          | 1,033          | 1,107          | 833            | 826            | 486            | -60.42%        |
| Black                               | 5,204          | 3,347          | 2,399          | 1,698          | 1,397          | 1,072          | 1,427          | 906            | -82.59%        |
| <b>Leflore</b>                      |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 14,394         | 16,482         | 16,699         | 17,550         | 16,724         | 14,516         | 11,384         | 8,038          | -44.16%        |
| Black                               | 38,970         | 35,207         | 30,307         | 24,374         | 24,553         | 22,642         | 25,701         | 23,342         | -40.10%        |
| <b>Quitman</b>                      |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 9,120          | 10,183         | 7,715          | 6,687          | 5,530          | 4,250          | 3,083          | 2,381          | -73.89%        |
| Black                               | 18,034         | 15,618         | 13,254         | 9,120          | 7,074          | 6,193          | 6,942          | 5,724          | -68.26%        |
| <b>Sharkey</b>                      |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 4,317          | 3,707          | 3,247          | 3,125          | 2,700          | 2,339          | 1,932          | 1,370          | -68.26%        |
| Black                               | 11,091         | 9,170          | 7,469          | 5,784          | 5,229          | 4,686          | 4,561          | 3,490          | -68.53%        |
| <b>Sunflower</b>                    |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 17,465         | 17,872         | 14,730         | 13,619         | 13,052         | 11,604         | 9,927          | 7,493          | -57.10%        |
| Black                               | 43,477         | 38,025         | 30,855         | 23,261         | 21,611         | 21,092         | 24,010         | 21,479         | -50.60%        |
| <b>Tallahatchie</b>                 |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 11,676         | 11,078         | 8,580          | 7,657          | 7,252          | 6,257          | 5,904          | 5,988          | -48.72%        |
| Black                               | 22,450         | 19,355         | 15,400         | 11,632         | 9,823          | 8,881          | 8,857          | 8,679          | -61.34%        |
| <b>Tunica</b>                       |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 3,265          | 3,939          | 3,505          | 3,225          | 2,566          | 1,992          | 2,541          | 2,553          | -21.81%        |
| Black                               | 19,335         | 17,719         | 13,315         | 8,614          | 7,050          | 6,148          | 6,473          | 7,918          | -59.05%        |
| <b>Washington</b>                   |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 18,568         | 23,436         | 35,239         | 31,803         | 31,619         | 28,334         | 21,393         | 13,784         | -25.76%        |
| Black                               | 48,831         | 46,821         | 43,097         | 38,460         | 40,216         | 39,197         | 40,667         | 36,468         | -25.32%        |
|                                     |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|                                     |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| Total Population Change by Race     |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                | % Change       |
|                                     | 1940           | 1950           | 1960           | 1970           | 1980           | 1990           | 2000           | 2010           | 1940-2010      |
| <b>Delta Core (11)</b>              |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White                               | 116,052        | 128,897        | 128,800        | 122,770        | 115,328        | 100,241        | 82,507         | 61,731         | -46.81%        |
| Black                               | 313,241        | 279,794        | 237,499        | 188,754        | 178,296        | 164,913        | 174,301        | 156,665        | -49.99%        |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>429,293</b> | <b>408,691</b> | <b>366,299</b> | <b>311,524</b> | <b>293,624</b> | <b>265,154</b> | <b>256,808</b> | <b>218,396</b> | <b>-49.13%</b> |

Source: US Census

| Table 2: Mississippi Delta Selected Cities           |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Population   |                |                |                |                |                | % Change       |
| City   | 1970           | 1980           | 1990           | 2000           | 2010           | 1970-2010      |
| Belzoni  | 3,146          | 2,982          | 2,536          | 2,663          | 2,235          | -28.96%        |
| Charleston   | 2,821          | 2,878          | 2,328          | 2,198          | 2,193          | -22.26%        |
| Clarksdale   | 21,673         | 21,137         | 19,717         | 20,645         | 17,962         | -17.12%        |
| Cleveland  | 13,327         | 14,524         | 15,384         | 13,841         | 12,334         | -7.45%         |
| Greenville   | 41,802         | 40,613         | 45,226         | 41,633         | 34,400         | -17.71%        |
| Greenwood  | 22,400         | 20,115         | 18,906         | 18,425         | 15,205         | -32.12%        |
| Indianola  | 8,947          | 8,221          | 11,809         | 12,066         | 10,683         | 19.40%         |
| Marks  | 2,609          | 2,260          | 1,758          | 1,551          | 1,735          | -33.50%        |
| Rolling Fork   | 2,034          | 2,590          | 2,444          | 2,486          | 2,143          | 5.36%          |
| Rosedale   | 2,599          | 2,793          | 2,595          | 2,414          | 1,873          | -27.93%        |
| Tunica   | 3,010          | 1,361          | 1,175          | 1,132          | 1,030          | -65.78%        |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>124,368</b> | <b>119,474</b> | <b>123,878</b> | <b>119,054</b> | <b>101,793</b> | <b>-18.15%</b> |
| Mississippi Delta Selected Cities Population by Race |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| Population   |                |                |                |                |                | % Change       |
| City   | 1970           | 1980           | 1990           | 2000           | 2010           | 1970-2010      |
| Belzoni  |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 1,224          | 1,358          | 1,108          | 812            | 508            | -58.50%        |
| Black  | 1,911          | 1,602          | 1,405          | 1,813          | 1,685          | -11.83%        |
| Charleston   |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 1,364          | 1,296          | 1,022          | 863            | 575            | -57.84%        |
| Black  | 1,448          | 1,557          | 1,292          | 1,312          | 1,598          | 10.36%         |
| Clarksdale   |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 9,840          | 7,984          | 7,406          | 6,184          | 3,496          | -64.47%        |
| Black  | 11,703         | 13,022         | 12,195         | 14,146         | 14,184         | 21.20%         |
| Cleveland  |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 8,284          | 8,674          | 8,260          | 6,907          | 5,859          | -29.27%        |
| Black  | 4,919          | 5,711          | 7,014          | 6,679          | 6,189          | 25.82%         |
| Greenville   |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 19,724         | 16,181         | 17,982         | 12,039         | 6,963          | -64.70%        |
| Black  | 21,882         | 24,137         | 26,969         | 28,976         | 26,849         | 22.70%         |
| Greenwood  |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 11,118         | 9,510          | 7,596          | 6,047          | 4,669          | -58.01%        |
| Black  | 11,130         | 10,460         | 11,186         | 12,042         | 10,221         | -8.17%         |
| Indianola  |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 3,903          | 4,047          | 3,959          | 3,105          | 2,003          | -48.68%        |
| Black  | 5,000          | 4,148          | 7,794          | 8,854          | 8,480          | 69.60%         |
| Marks  |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 1,070          | 861            | 698            | 537            | 551            | -48.50%        |
| Black  | 1,520          | 1,393          | 1,045          | 1,003          | 1,164          | -23.42%        |
| Rolling Fork   |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 967            | 1,000          | 886            | 738            | 548            | -43.33%        |
| Black  | 1,063          | 1,581          | 1,547          | 1,720          | 1,568          | 47.51%         |
| Rosedale   |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 891            | 736            | 639            | 407            | 239            | -73.18%        |
| Black  | 1,686          | 2,028          | 1,923          | 1,980          | 1,621          | -3.86%         |
| Tunica   |                |                |                |                |                |                |
| White  | 1,192          | 946            | 860            | 768            | 703            | -41.02%        |
| Black  | 1,812          | 410            | 309            | 333            | 300            | -83.44%        |
| Source: US Census                                    |                |                |                |                |                |                |

programs. Because the community is in a state of considerable need there is a palpable movement to improve the standard of living for inhabitants.

Historically, the social, economic, and political systems of the Delta have blocked people's movement from poverty. In addition to the mere strains of living in poverty, the lack of a quality education, appropriate health care, and an opportunity for achieving economic and psychological independence add to the burden of this entrapment. These challenges, along with the vestiges of past discrimination, are embedded in the institutions and culture to make Mississippi particularly challenging to policy makers who are charged with providing equitable opportunity for the poor (Cobb, 1992; Duncan & Blackwell, 2014; Myers Asch, 2011).

In addition to recognizing the structural economic impediments that exist in impoverished communities, this thesis also focuses on better understanding the sociological factors the economically disadvantaged young adults in Clarksdale encounter when seeking access to the labor market. This case study explores the variables evident for success in a workforce development program for young adult men, ages 17 to 26 years. Many of these young men come from unstable home environments, with inadequate preparation for education, irregular access to health care, opportunistic access to illegal markets for economic means, and the attractions of a violent gang subculture. However, these individuals voluntarily enlisted into a workforce development program, and they were self-determined to alter their economic conditions.

Research indicates that economic improvement or development is often the byproduct of a strong social infrastructure. And building a strong local infrastructure takes a strong unified leadership structure in the community. To enhance an impoverished community, the community needs positive social interactions and favorable characteristics of localities. For example,

communities with higher levels of social capital and social trusts among its leaders and residents will be better able to achieve its goals together. Social theorists maintain that the local setting is important (Wilkinson, 1991), and that strong social infrastructures yield stronger support for workforce development (Brown, Nylander, King, & Lough, 2000; Nylander & Brown, 2004; Robinson & Meikle-Yaw, 2007).

The creation and development of strong local social infrastructures (public and private partnerships for community and workforce development) enhance the success of such projects. An analysis of the factors influencing workforce development in Clarksdale will allow for the debunking of misconceptions about those facing persistent poverty, and reshape the ideas and practices of future training and development programs. The significance of discovering these factors will alter the focus from only measuring workforce development through individual successes to understanding the need for collective action at the community and regional level that transforms individuals, who then will mobilize their social and economic capital for success (Robinson & Meikle-Yaw, 2007).

In spite of dire circumstances, communities can improve attitudes and participatory behaviors through workforce development, and in turn, foster more positive results by enhancing the local social infrastructure. For a workforce development program to succeed in creating an employable workforce, it must help individuals develop the skills for the job, while simultaneously assisting participants in recognizing the importance of believing in their own self-worth and the need for strong social support systems. This study reveals the mutually-beneficial actions of community engagement and civic participation, which will add to the literature in understanding how to more successfully accomplish workforce development.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Political decision makers at all levels of government often mirror the power arrangements of the dominant society and its institutions (Bullard, 2000). Creating an employable workforce is essential in developing a community with better healthcare, education, and raising the standard of living. Workforce development is thus critical for community development. The WIN Job center is housed in downtown Clarksdale in order to address that need. The services provided include job placement, job corps, veterans' services, Trade Adjustment Assistance, job search skills training, Information Technology Academy, and referral to special services for migrant seasonal farm workers.

Some researchers have argued that community development precedes economic development (Grisham, 1999; Robinson & Christensen, 1989); however, whether community development precedes economic development it is more complicated than basic community or economic development principles. Community leaders have vested interests in the development of places and often influence political and economic structures to their favor by developing unified policies advancing their agendas (Logan, 2007). In impoverished communities, residents are typically unaware of these decisions and market forces. Moreover, in historically divided communities built on extractive and exploitive industries, a common pattern seen is entrenched systems of segregated leadership structures and unfair economic practices, such as wage gaps between blacks and whites (Brown & Nylander, 1998; Brown et al., 2000; Hill, 2008; McMichael, 2016).

Job placement, job corps, job search skills training are valuable services for the community. The skill sets that these programs develop are applicable for individuals who have strong social support systems, but are not structured to address some of the persistent and

systemic poverty issues limiting workforce development. For a workforce development program to succeed in creating an employable workforce, it must help individuals develop the skills for the job, while simultaneously assisting participants in recognizing the importance of believing in their own self-worth and the need for strong social support systems.

### *Building Social, Community, and Economic Development: Theory*

The Mississippi Delta has identifiable regional organizations (infrastructures) that focus on economic development; however, many Delta towns lack the needed diverse and effective public and private sector partnerships dedicated to improving their community through community and economic development efforts. To create strong social infrastructures and to fight persistent poverty, development work needs to expand the civic engagement efforts in the community by increasing the number of public and private sector partnerships, which focus on the social betterment (Robinson & Green, 2011).

For this to happen, community leadership needs to recognize that everyone in the community is a valuable member, and their input important for the overall community growth. The challenge is to identify and develop leaders who recognize this need in rural places, and also for them to take ownership of the historical practices of the past and its limitations structurally, and to then move forward with effective leadership (Brown & Nylander, 1998; Brown et., 2000; Stovall, Robinson, Nylander, & Brown, 2011).

In “The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class,” Standing described the precariat as a new class in society. This new class’ labor was insecure and unstable, creating an informal nature to their work often described by part-time labor. Their livelihoods were characterized by chronic uncertainties (Standing, 2014), and, in many ways, this analysis is appropriate for the Deltans and their consistent struggle for day-to-day survival. For example, the majority of available jobs



in Clarksdale are minimum wage, which is often insufficient for meeting monthly house rents. The median household income is \$28,988, and the poverty level is 35 percent, with whites at 11.6 percent and blacks at 41.2 percent. Of the 57.3 percent of the population 16 years and over in the labor force, 11 percent are unemployed (Census fact finder, 2017). A large percentage of the population finds themselves unemployed, and therefore they have little income to meet basic housing expenses. This creates stressful living conditions in which families face evictions and are forced to live with family and friends. Providing stable living conditions should be an accommodation for helping individuals transition in a workforce development program. This weak social infrastructure adds enormous psychological strain on individuals.

Classical social theorist, George Herbert Mead, argued that society takes priority over the individual mind. In other words, an individual's self is carefully constructed through the significant social interactions one encounters as they move through life. For Mead, the creation of the individual mind (self) was a process, not a fixed thing; meaning it is the compilation of all of those significant social interactions with others in society and it continues throughout one's life. Mead developed components within his theory that showed how society dominates the individual through the accepting of an organized set of attitudes from others. This is not a deterministic view of social change, but an ongoing negotiation between the individual's creativity, and the established patterns of society that tend to have more influence on one's actions (Mead, 1934).

Wilkerson (1991) extended this symbolic interactionist thinking to more pragmatic ways to study community. His work examined community in a geographical place where significant social interactions happened. Researchers have argued that the Delta has a unique history with its old South community and economic practices, which, as stated already, are characterized by

divisions in the social and physical structures. Moreover, in the early to mid-1900s, the modern technological changes in agriculture in the Delta displaced workers, and altered the social and economic patterns throughout the region, marking a substantial structural transformation of people's lives. This transformation brought multiple community and economic shifts within a generation, with efforts to promote community and economic development in the Delta failing to offset the market forces. Theorists and researchers argue over the importance of community leaders and others recognizing market forces as rational actors, and then whether or not their work on community development initiatives will successfully alter economic structures or markets (Brown, Nylander, King, & Lough, 2000, Gnuschke, Hyland, Wallace, Hanson, & Smith, 2008; Polanyi, 1944).

Although recognizing that theorist Karl Polanyi (1944) argued that there was nothing natural about the free market, community development experts have documented that social change and improved economic conditions are possible when local citizens take responsibility for their own communities (Christenson & Robinson, 1989; Grisham, 1999). When all community residents have opportunities to participate in development projects, they learn new leadership skills and come together to make better decisions for the community. However, Delta residents consistently have negative connotations of their region and its failures. These descriptions of being the worst in the nation, and far different than any other place in the United States, lead to self-fulfilling prophecies of despair and helplessness. These forces then tend to be internalized within the collective psyche, leading Deltans to act on what they perceive to be real, whether true or not.

Understanding these perceptions are critical in evaluating workforce development in Clarksdale. In order to identify what motivates young adults to become employed, we must

consider how they have internalized these societal forces that make up the social infrastructure. Their everyday realities and social interactions are constructed on their limited understanding of their local worlds and how others define it for them. To capture the best practices of workforce development, the meaning participants perceive is essential to understand, and the obvious deleterious impact of the social problems encountered must also be understood.

One social challenge impeding the advancement of one's opportunity for successful workforce training in the Clarksdale community is viable access to healthy food. Receiving regular access to healthy food is a major concern for young adults who may not have completed school or who are unemployed. Also, living in an economically depressed community results in high dependence on welfare payments, which make up a substantial source of income for a large percentage of the residents throughout the Mississippi Delta. These assistance programs provide a consistent and dependable income for individuals, and they are essential for the livelihood of many families. Because many of the jobs available in the Clarksdale community are minimum wage, there is little income boost for individuals working a minimum wage job over receiving government assistance. This creates tension for some individuals seeking employment because there is no motivation or satisfaction perceived from gainful employment. Understanding the motivating factors of participants in a workforce development program is important because they determine the participant's commitment to the outcome.

As previously mentioned, lack of affordable housing is another factor affecting workforce development in communities. "When people have a place to live, they become better parents, workers, and citizens" (Desmond, 2016, p. 295). A lack of home is therefore destabilizing for people, destroying one's sense of self. It weighs heavily on their minds and triggers mistakes at work or in school. It overwhelms people with stress. In an expose of poor renting families and

their struggles with evictions, one tenant stated, “[She] could feel the house sucking their energy. We just hit a mud hole with this house. No one’s trying to get better. Makes me not want to get better. If you’re around people all day that doesn’t want to do anything, eventually you will feel like doing nothing” (Desmond, 2016, p. 258).

The lack of adequate paying jobs in rural communities throughout the Delta often results in this type of response. Unfortunately for most who are wealthy or who have never experienced poverty or the historical oppression that permeates the entire social infrastructure, there is a gap in their understanding of these decisions. When government assistance becomes more dependable than the struggles of overcoming a broken social structure, the realities of dependency become true; thus, the perception by others of a lack of interest and reluctance to change.

Falling ill, having a family emergency, or having the car break down on the way to work will not impact the government assistance. However, any of these issues occurring often result in a days’ lost wages if not more. The lost wages in conjunction with the cause for the absence or tardiness at work can easily snowball into unmanageable financial obligations which spirals into further financial difficulties. This is another factor that must be understood for a workforce development program that is to guide participants into becoming fully employed members of the community.

For individuals living in an environment of scarcity and insecurity, income dependability determines their livelihood. The Federal Welfare Reform Law was passed in 1996 as an attempt to end dependence of welfare recipients on the government. The reform law replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Under TANF, a recipient can receive benefits for a maximum of 60 months. TANF’s

primary goal is to prepare recipients to become self-sufficient, and to end their need for financial assistance from the government. Recipients who are not exempt are therefore required to find work within 24 months of receiving assistance. The TANF recipient is also aided by a case worker to create a plan of action.

All of these factors are exacerbated by the racial tensions in a community. The majority of whites in Clarksdale are in the middle and upper class. Whereas the working class community is predominantly black. This creates a power tension dynamic that reinforces many of the stereotypes between the races. The majority of employers are white, whereas the majority of employees are black. Perceptions of the opposite race through the lens of this continued power struggle maintain the racial inequality that was fostered through slavery and sharecropping. This creates a dynamic that fails to promote change and growth, and fosters animosity between sides within the community. Many black residents in the community feel as though they have no chance against the forces of historical institutional discrimination. Many white residents feel as though the black community chooses to keep themselves down. And although these are perceptions, they create a dynamic that hinders growth and becomes real in their consequences. Not recognizing and discussing these issues must also be considered as factors that limit the success of participants striving to achieve employment through workforce development programs.

#### *Meraki Job Training Program*

One successful program in Clarksdale is Griot Arts Inc. This program originally began as an after school program for underprivileged high school students in the community. The mission was to provide a safe space in which students could tell their story through the arts. As students matriculated through the program, the staff struggled with how to support students upon

graduation from high school. It was apparent that these students lacked the soft skills to become employed, and there was no opportunity for them to develop these skills in Clarksdale. These soft skills include self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence, integrity, responsibility, communication, professionalism, teamwork, and work ethic.

To address this issue, the Griot staff started the Meraki job training program for young adults. In this two-year program participants would develop soft skills as well as a variety of skill sets appropriate for entry-level manual labor jobs. The program's primary focus was for participants to tend to an acre vegetable farm. After growing the vegetables, the participants would sell their produce at the local farmers market and local restaurants in town. The job of taking care of the crops until harvest and selling it reinforced the soft skills of responsibility, integrity, and work ethic. Participants' activities with the director, businessmen, and community members, reinforced the soft skills of communication, courtesy, professionalism, and teamwork. The goal of the program was not only to provide training in skills needed to achieve employment, but also for participants to achieve personal growth to become independent, responsible young adults in the community.

During the program's operation, financial issues began to arise and eventually caused the program to end. Funders backed out of funding the program due to the length of time before the program could prove to be successful. After a sixth-month evaluation, funders found that other than progress reports which demonstrated some improvement, there were no identifiable changes among the participants that could clearly determine whether they would successfully gain employment. From the Meraki staff end, progress reports that indicated that the participants showed up on time prepared to work, engaged with others in a positive manner, and successfully

completed their tasks were a tremendous success. However these were not the measurements funders consider significantly important.

Without continuing funding for the program, Meraki was forced to end. Transforming the lives of young adult men into responsible young adults was not what the funders envisioned for their dollars going into a workforce development program. The grantors failed to recognize the significance of these improvements in the social psychological factors, which were transforming and mobilizing participants to define success for themselves. In turn, this success would have resembled the outcomes desired by the funders and program staff, which included achieving employment and motivation to partake in workforce development.

For funders this work had to happen within a six-month period; however, such transformation and ensuing workforce development preparation will only occur through a long-term approach. This requires outcomes assessment to also include the integrity and sustainability of the program. The current measures through which funding is determined fails to consider the difficulties in areas of high poverty and does not permit programs to address the multifaceted needs of underprivileged individuals.

Several of the aforementioned issues began to impact the Meraki Program. One issue was the stipend that participants received while employed at Meraki. The stipend was insufficient for participants to meet their financial needs to live independently. The stipend did not cover rent payments or bills for the participants. Much of the participants' motivation to gain employment was to support themselves to live independently. Without the ability to provide for themselves, forcing the majority to remain at their families' homes, lessened their motivation. Not only was the stipend insufficient to support independent living, it was also insufficient for meeting other financial obligations such as weekly groceries or phone and power bills. The inability for the

stipend to create food, housing, or income security for participants continued to reinforce limiting factors that resulted from living in an economically depressed environment, rather than eliminate them.

As a Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CEED) Scholar with the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement at the University of Mississippi for the 2016-2017 academic year, I have examined numerous community engagement theories and practices for understanding work in impoverished communities. The McLean Institute CEED team's curriculum was the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program, which was a framework for understanding and implementing an entrepreneurial mindset (Stangler & Jordan, 2015; Taulbert & Schoeniger, 2010). This training has been valuable, along with the knowledge I gained from serving as the cofounder of the Meraki Job Training Program. Leading and working at this job training program grounded my experience in the realities of the day-to-day challenges for this local community program.

#### *Workforce Development in Historical Context*

Anderson (2010) states that sustainable development demands a continued emphasis on economic development to provide the financial capital needed to eradicate poverty and solve environmental problems. This definition captures the interdependence of building social and human capital in order to promote sustainable development and fight poverty. In the South, poverty and environmental decline are interdependent parts of the cycle of underdevelopment. The current approach perpetuates a discrepancy by promoting economic development without reinvesting enough in building human capital. However sustainable growth requires meeting the basic human needs of all people and improving the imbalance of resource consumption between the rich and poor (Anderson, 2010). Restoring this imbalance occurs when the community



actively engages in achieving sustainable living for its community members. And although everyone unanimously agrees in the successfulness of this model and reasoning, this community engagement model needs additional practice and resources in Clarksdale.

Investing capital needed to eradicate poverty means allocating funds from the community into the common good of the impoverished. “A primary argument in community development is that functional leaders will concentrate their efforts on behalf of the larger citizenry rather than simply acting in their own individual interests, a problem which often threatens the well-being of the community” (Brown et al., 2000, p 192). For leaders in Clarksdale the reluctance to engage in this community and economic development strategy might be justified due to the uncertainty of the outcome. Without a guarantee that the investment can result in more income for those forgoing present economic benefits, long term sustainable growth for all is unclear. Often times this is justified through past prejudices, historical economic decline, and increasing poverty. However, effective leadership structures solve these problems by engaging diverse community members and including the community-at-large in the decision-making activities (Stovall et al., 2011).

Extensive research has been collected regarding the social ills troubling the Mississippi Delta (Cobb, 1992; Myers Asch, 2011). According to Harvey (2013), race is a critical variable for understanding the obstacles to community development in the Mississippi Delta. Harvey argues that “white leaders who dominate the private sector generally see “community development” as secondary to and distinct from “economic development” proper, which, in their view, entails industrial recruitment and the expansion of industrial agriculture” (Harvey, 2013, p 265).

A black middle-class leader in a Delta town captured it this way for Harvey.

“What you’re stuck with [here] are people who can’t go anywhere. There are two kinds of people who can’t go anywhere and those are the people that have so many resources

tied into the community [economic and political] that they can't . . . and . . . those that just literally cannot afford [to leave] . . . [T]hat gap is exacerbated by the difference in those two cultures [i.e., races] and they don't come together at all. So then what you see is that 'have-not' group becomes an extreme drain on the 'haves' and they resent that and so they end up resenting one another: 'I resent you because you have everything and you don't help me and you don't give me whatever.' And on the other hand, 'I resent you because you're dragging down my community; you're lazy and you won't get up and do things.' . . . And in that gap, people are going at each other and they're very suspicious of one another. It's hard to put together good social programs when people are so suspicious." (Harvey 2013)

Building community and economic development initiatives with such weak social infrastructures is difficult. This persistent and systemic poverty cannot be addressed with a single solution, but must utilize a holistic and integrated approach to transcending poverty. Therefore there has to be a shift of belief systems of the leaders and community members. Healing the community from scars of hundreds of years will have to happen in concert with advancing the individual for success. As Mead (1934) theorized the individual is a socially constructed reflection of the society it inhabits. Thus, any program fighting poverty in the Mississippi Delta must include the whole community in the decision-making process to understand the appropriate structures for improving the community and economy. Obviously these principles apply to workforce development in the region. The apparent disparities between the wealthy and impoverished become embodied in programming such as workforce development. Workforce development programs must then not only reeducate and train for job employability, but also address the pervasive social ills and weak social infrastructure if they are to be successful.

Although this may be a difficult task for impoverished communities, it is needed if the leadership and business community desire continued economic growth moving forward, as training human capital is the prime engine for growth. Workforce development alone cannot solve

the larger brokenness within a community, but it must be part of the solution with many other social and developmental programs.

### *Support for Workforce Development*

Community colleges are designated as the lead agency to provide workforce training in 19 states, including Mississippi. Training in high demand fields, training disadvantaged students, including ex-offenders in Mississippi, customized training for employers, noncredit occupational training, and funding of training equipment are some programs offered through community colleges. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was enacted to coordinate funding for workforce development initiatives. However, coordination of workforce funding remained an issue for almost all states in which the policy was enacted. Furthermore, most states found that the lack of coordination from funding sources further restricted the responsiveness to workforce needs (Davis & Boswell, 2003). At the time, Mississippi expressed no such concerns. This suggests that adequate resources were being made available to address the workforce development in the state. However, workforce development in Clarksdale was underdeveloped. This may be due to the lack of funding and coordination for the region, or an inappropriate program structure to serve the needs of the community.

An existing trend in workforce development on employment and employee behaviors further emphasizes the need for holistic programs that help the individual transform, in addition to acquiring trade specific skills. This new business landscape creates company obligations to help people explore opportunities, and promote lifelong learning. These changes in attitudes and values suggest the importance of workforce development in the long term interest of companies, due to the need for adaptable employees that create value for the company. These methods will only be

adoptable and successfully implemented if the employees and employers are convinced that this career resilience program will serve them (Waterman, Waterman, & Collard, 1994).

Another concern for workforce development awareness is the lack of workforce planning among organizations. The reasons for reluctance to participate in workforce planning resembles those given in opposition to workforce development programs. These reasons included lack of available staff to create a program, lack of time, and workforce planning not being viewed as a pressing issue, since we have always “gotten by.” Justification to refrain from implementing a workforce development program included agencies’ uncertainty that there was no current overall mandate to conduct workforce planning, and the necessity to focus on short term needs and results due to current performance objectives (Johnson & Brown, 2004).

Resistance to work with human capital to achieve corporate, economic, and social benefits reveals a greater issue on behalf of citizens. Meeting individuals’ needs and identifying how best to work with those individuals requires meaningful time and effort. The results of such an investment are long term and sometimes difficult to identify. And the majority of people, even with consistent data suggesting that such an investment is necessary and worthwhile, refrain from doing so. This tendency can only be overcome by policy changes that mandate that the time and effort be placed in developing human capital.

Taking a holistic approach in workforce development programs is critical, as it is for communities to focus on strengthening their social infrastructure. The American Academy of Political and Social Science has conducted research and collected findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs, and concluded that programs aimed at successfully promoting positive youth development must address social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive

development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). These objectives are valuable for youth development as they will constantly be applied throughout their adult lives.

### *The Role of Public Assistance in the Mississippi Delta*

The question that often arises during conversations about workforce development in the Delta is whether there are sufficient jobs available for all work-ready welfare recipients in the area. The response to that question is, as John Ferguson of the Mid Delta Work Force Alliance answered at the Welfare Conference, “no”. However, in response to the question of whether more jobs can be developed, Ferguson stated that “yes, more jobs can be developed, but for the jobs to be developed, there must be adequate training for the individual job and the person has to be job ready.” This response is problematic for two reasons. The first is that the response maintains the status quo by shifting the responsibility of developing the jobs onto the incumbent workforce, rather than the community employing the incumbent. The question is therefore answered, but no productive next step is proposed. The second issue is that with the responsibility placed on the incumbent employee, any workforce development program is faced with yet another hurdle for participants to overcome in order to become employable. As such, it is also very difficult to prepare individuals for future employment for which they have no idea what training and skills will be applicable. It creates a precarious situation where the objectives are obscure, and unclear objectives are difficult to achieve and measure in order to develop a program.

Ferguson concluded his remarks by stating, “We have to train people and the jobs will come.” This comment presents challenges regarding seeking funding. Funding for programs must have clear outcomes for evaluation purposes. Attempts to fund a program to train people, without knowing for what and where to become employed, are generally futile. A number of factors can prevent employment for trainees. However, as funders determine the success of a program through

the objective of becoming employed, the intermediate factors that can deter employment will be overlooked. Funding for the program would then decrease because the objectives of the program are not being met.

Jean Denson of the Employment Training Division Department of Economic and Community Development shared findings on the training opportunities through the Welfare Reform Act. She stated that “the most prevalent training assistance for welfare recipients would be either the Pell Grant, or the Job Training Partnership Act” (Les, p. 15). Although education is universally agreed to be a positive catalyst for employment and improved standard of living, these resources do not automatically provide this. The highest education that the majority of welfare recipients received was a high school diploma, with many not possessing one. This means that higher education opportunities through the Pell Grant, whether college or junior college, was not a practical resource for many. They would likely need further academic guidance and counseling to successfully complete such a program. And they would need to seek and secure that support themselves, which given the context of the prevailing socioeconomic challenges facing welfare recipients it is highly unlikely. The Job Training Partnership Act has been successful preparing welfare recipients for employment mostly in the medical field, although basic academic proficiency is still assumed for this.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agreement allows participants one year of training, and six months on the job training. This time period is not sufficient for most who live in a high poverty region, particularly if the goal is to successfully help TANF recipients become self-sufficient, employed members of the community. As indicated already, these rural communities have broken social infrastructures; thus, more time is needed beyond basic skill-set instruction to successfully move participants into the labor market. The individuals must also learn

new habits of living, how to manage their time and resources, how to build self-efficacy, and how to maintain employment.

Much of the feedback given at the Welfare Conference by community members and welfare recipients expressed concern about the inherent disconnect between the objectives of the program and the necessary resources for productive and positive outcomes. Further concerns were made on the program treatment and existing operating procedures. Critics indicated that the participants were not being listened to and decisions were made without their input.

A Mississippi Senator suggested that the Department of Human Services look into dismissed cases and consider why participants dropped out of the program. This intensive work is difficult to implement as the Department of Human Services is currently burdened with their own staff shortage. However, some meaningful documentation through which the government can identify the problems and concerns with the welfare reform administration might be useful for worthy amendments.

The next chapter will discuss the methodological approach for this thesis. The primary analysis will be a qualitative study of a workforce development program, with the goal of understanding how to increase community engagement. Supplementary data are utilized on community leaders' perceptions of poverty and workforce development collected by the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement.

The argument has been made that community leaders are integral to the success of building strong social infrastructures. This happens when leaders and residents in communities connect to the development of the whole place, ultimately improving lives for all. These results will suggest a course of action to improve workforce development in the community, resulting in stronger people and economies. I also will share the successes and failures of the participants in the Meraki

Job Program. An analysis of this workforce development training for young adults in Clarksdale will offer insight into the sociological and economic factors impacting workforce development programs in the Delta. Additional research was collected on the participants post Meraki through interviews. These findings will also offer information on why some participants are no longer employed, and which factors prohibited them from seeking further employment.



### **Chapter III: Methods**

As a Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CEED) scholar, I participated in the 2016-2017 community engagement course and field work. CEED is one of the McLean Institute's signature projects to fight poverty through education in Mississippi. This thesis utilized a mixed-methods approach through in-depth interviews, the use of secondary data, and participant observation through personal experience leading a workforce development program.

Through in-depth interviews this study explored the sociological and economic factors that impacted eight participants in the Meraki Job Training Program over a year-long period. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that can involve intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents. In this case, this qualitative research technique was used to explore their perspectives on a particular phenomenon, which for this study was the workforce development program.

Workforce development programs in the Delta have been unable to provide sustainable employment for the community. The primary resource for individuals seeking employment are the WIN job center in downtown Clarksdale, and through the local community college, Coahoma Community College. Another workforce development program that provided job training for young adults was the Meraki Job Training Program. This program was created in partnership with Griot Arts Inc., an after school program serving underprivileged youth in the community. The mission of the program is to provide young men and women meaningful work throughout their adulthood to break the generational poverty in Coahoma County and in the Mississippi Delta. This study examined the journey of all eight participants through the Meraki program, as well as conducted interviews with participants following their immediate employment after the program.

The participants of the program were all African American males that resided within the Clarksdale city limits. They had all graduated from high school or received their GED. They were between 17 and 26 years of age and unemployed at the start of the program in the fall of 2014. All of the participants were former gang members. They were selected to participate in the program by submitting application forms to Griot, as well as through a preliminary interview. As the program was trying to serve a community need, the interviews and applications were not being evaluated as a means by which to disqualify participants, but rather as a baseline to gather information on the individuals.

The program operated during business days, and it was structured around vegetable farming. Participants managed and grew vegetables in a two acre vegetable farm, and then sold vegetables to local restaurants and a local farmers market. During the week, participants also interned at the local Oxbow restaurant. On Fridays participants attended classes to learn about food sustainability, healthy living, business writing, and financial planning. Participants were expected to arrive at 8:00 am and be dismissed around 3:00 pm, and they received biweekly stipends.

Once every quarter participants were reevaluated based on their progress. These evaluations were based on the Meraki Standards Chart. The standards chart consisted of rules and expected behavior that reinforced the soft skills (e.g., self-efficacy) that we were developing in participants, as well as mandatory regulations that any employer would enforce, such as drug use policies, and having a weapon free workplace. Violations of minor infractions such as tardiness, not wearing their uniform, or not having the appropriate tools for work resulted in money being taken out of the paycheck. However, termination never became a consequence of these infractions. Major infractions, such as stealing, multiple failed drug tests, or violent behavior at work adhered to a three strike policy, with the third strike resulting in termination.

The Meraki Program was based on successful and vetted programs in other places: Homeboy Industries, in Los Angeles, and Grow Dat, in New Orleans. Homeboy Industries provides hope, training, and support to former gang members who had been incarcerated. The mission of Grow Dat Youth Farm is to nurture a diverse group of young leaders through the meaningful work of growing food. Participants visited Grow Dat during a weekend visit to New Orleans. The mission of Meraki blended the mission and vision of these two programs. Meraki's mission was to provide hope, training, and support to underprivileged young adults in the community by engaging participants in the meaningful work of growing food.

Serving as the Assistant Director of the program, I had support from two other staff members in operating the program. The executive director of Griot Arts Inc. managed the executive functions of the program, and the director of Meraki interacted daily with participants, managed the farm, and completed evaluations on the participants. I conducted the classes on Fridays, scheduled speakers, completed administrative duties, and created, monitored, and managed the schedules and evaluations of participants. I will provide an analysis of my personal experience leading this program, as well as analyzing data collected during the in-depth follow up interviews.

The interviews conducted as part of this research were conducted post-graduation from the Meraki program. At the end of the program all remaining participants had gained employment. There were four remaining participants at the time. The other four participants had been willfully terminated for violations of the Meraki standards chart. The graduated participants were employed at the local animal shelter, Oxbow restaurant, and Cricket Wireless. Those who had been terminated remained unemployed.

I developed a semi-structured interview guide to assist in collecting information from participants. They were asked a series of questions on the impact of the job training program. The semi-structured approach permitted participants the opportunity to offer additional information on the experience. The interview guide included these questions.

- Why did you enroll at Meraki?
- Why were you looking for employment?
- How would money help you?
- Do you think your employment is essential for your life success?
- What does a successful life look like to you?
- Do you think you will be able to achieve this—why or why not?
- What do you need in a job to help you maintain it?
- Is your immediate family employed?
- Describe your housing situation. Have you lived in the same home your entire life?
- Do you have regular access to health care?

These questions assisted in evaluating the factors impacting the success of workforce development for these individuals in Clarksdale. The strength of this in-depth approach, although with few participants, was that more detailed information became available than would have occurred with only surveys. Moreover the participants knew me and they were more open and offering authentic answers. However, a limitation is that they might be more prone to bias, since I served as the Assistant Director, and they may have wanted to present a different reality. Another limitation for in-depth interviews is the difficulty to generalize beyond the small sample, although detailed information is collected.

Because of these limitations I am analyzing secondary data by Delta leaders to support the study of evaluating these sociological factors on development and social change in the Mississippi Delta. Next is a description of the secondary data utilized to supplement the insights gained via these qualitative in-depth interviews.

### *McLean Institute Delta Leadership Data*

The McLean Institute Delta Leadership Survey was administered by the University of Mississippi's McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement in 2013 to selected Delta Leaders throughout the eight states of the Delta Regional Authority's defined Mississippi Delta region (Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee). This survey was used to assess the perceptions of Delta leaders on issues related to poverty.

Delta leaders were asked to participate in an online Qualtrics survey. Almost 2000 surveys were sent to leaders throughout the eight-state region. Email addresses for leaders were collected from an existing database the McLean Institute had for regional leaders. This database consisted of Business Development Professionals, Community Leaders (Mayors, etc.), Economic Development Professionals, Educational Professionals, Faith Community Leaders, Government Leaders, and Non-Profit Professionals.

Through the Qualtrics program 1806 email addresses were sent out, with 408 respondents opening the survey, and 276 completing it. For the consent statement, "I have read and understood the above consent form and desire of my own free will to participate in this study," 335 answered yes to this question. Participants were asked to be a part of a research study to examine Delta leaders' perceptions of poverty in the Delta region and to describe potential solutions. Data were to assist practitioners in better understanding the perceptions of poverty throughout the Mississippi River Delta Region. The survey consisted of open-ended questions to address these issues, with a number of questions formed in statements that used a 5-point Likert response scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree to gauge participants' perceptions. Here is an example of a list of statements:

- “Education is the most important factor for helping people get out of poverty.”
- “Most people in poverty do not try hard enough to improve their conditions.”
- “There are not enough well-paying jobs.”
- “There are not enough jobs.”
- “Churches should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”
- “Nonprofit service organizations should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”
- “The poor quality of public schools is leading to poverty.”
- “Colleges and universities should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”
- “Businesses should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”
- “Even if someone increases their level of education, it is unlikely that they will get a better job.”
- “When someone increase their level of education, it is more likely that they will pursue opportunities outside of the Delta region.”
- “People generally help each other to improve quality of life.”
- “Economic inequality is a major problem that needs special attention.”
- “Policy changes are needed to reduce poverty rates.”
- “There are forces beyond people’s individual level of control that contribute to poverty.”
- “Too many single-parent families lead to greater poverty.”
- “Poverty is greater along racial lines.”

In the next chapter answers to these statements along with other findings from this leadership survey will be discussed in conjunction with the case study findings of the Meraki program. Human subjects review was approved by the University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board. The required materials can be found in the Appendix.

## **Chapter IV: Findings and Discussion**

### *Participant Observation in a Workforce Development Program*

The focus of this thesis is to identify the sociological and economic factors impacting the success of workforce development programs in Clarksdale, Mississippi. These factors were identified through the analysis of participants in the Meraki Job Training Program and interviews with job training participants. Through my experiences as Assistant Director of the Meraki Job Training Program, I was personally involved with the structuring of the program, and in teaching and mentoring participants.

As noted previously, participants of the Meraki program were selected through a standard application process. Application forms were dispersed throughout the community, and through members of Griot Arts after school program. The forms and interviews were used to collect information and served as a screening mechanism. However, our screening process did not disqualify applicants, but rather identified which applicants were in greatest need of support to gain employment. Several applicants were not selected for Meraki because we believed they had the means and academic capacity to excel in a junior college, undergraduate program, or technical job training program. Through this selection process, we selected eight participants for Meraki. These young adults are given pseudonyms for the purpose of this study, and they will be called Paul, Jonathon, Troy, Carter, Rodger, Lenny, Bob, and Andrew. All of these men began at Meraki in 2015.

Paul was in his 20s. He is an orphaned native of Clarksdale. As a little boy he decided to live with friends, rather than with his remaining family, his sister. He moved between friends throughout grade school and middle school, and ultimately moved in with a local family for his high school career. Paul graduated high school with honors. He then went on to Northwest

Community College; however, he dropped out after two semesters because he did not have the financial resources to complete the program. After returning to Clarksdale, he unsuccessfully sought employment at local stores. He immediately applied to Meraki after hearing about the program. He has successfully maintained employment since completing Meraki. He has also moved into his own place and purchased a vehicle.

During his time at Meraki, Paul immediately assumed a position of leadership. He was always the first participant to attempt the new skill or activity for the day. He is precocious and easily shared how he was doing, challenged staff when he disagreed with them, and spoke up about any suggestions he had for the program. The biggest challenge he had in the program was working with participants if they were having trouble keeping up with the tasks for the day. Because he excelled when given the opportunity to work, he was often frustrated when having to participate in mundane tasks to reinforce soft skills, or when engaging in basic financial and businesses classes that he had already completed in community college. Although Meraki helped Paul eventually find employment, the greatest asset the program created for him was the connections and resources to find the right job.

Jonathon was in his 20s. He is a native of Clarksdale. He has two brothers and a sister. His family is an anomaly at Griot in that he resides at home with both of his parents, who have been married his entire life. In high school Jonathon fell in with a dysfunctional group at school and became a gang member. He promptly began getting in trouble at school and was expelled soon thereafter. In an attempt to teach Jonathon a lesson, his parents kicked him out of their home. Jonathon moved in with some friends and remained with them for a year. After several positive interactions with Griot Arts staff members, he enrolled in MS Job Corps and successfully achieved



his GED. After returning to Clarksdale, he moved back in with his family. However, he was unsuccessful at gaining employment and thus enrolled at Meraki.

Jonathon was passionate to find employment throughout his time at Meraki, however, he was easily discouraged if he felt disrespected or frustrated with the activity. He was easily overwhelmed by personal feelings of self-doubt and would quickly harbor resentment. Jonathon had accepted an organized set of negative attitudes from others and he struggled to overcome them. His infractions of the standards chart were always minor and were perhaps the result of the aforementioned feelings. If discouraged at the end of the workday, he would arrive late the next day to work, which enlisted an infraction. While on the worksite, if another participant disrespected him or frustrated him, he would leave the worksite or just sit outside the remainder of the day. When asked why the interaction or activity was so upsetting to justify his departure or disengagement, he would argue one of the following: “Man, what’s the point?” or “It’s not going to get better no way.”

Although Jonathon’s responses to regular occurrences at work were often disproportionate to the actual event that frustrated him, his responses are a reflection of his perception of the realities that have limited him thus far and are present throughout the community. It was clear that it was not as simple as saying that he needed to change his bad decisions. The lack of self-confidence and his ability to control his own motivation, behavior, and social environment were larger than a simple self-evaluation. However, as understandable as his behaviors might be in the context of the community he had been socialized in, they were unacceptable in the design of this program. In the normal work environment, these actions result in termination, which is exactly what happened to Jonathon after he gained employment after Meraki.

Troy was in his 20s. He lived with his girlfriend and their one-year-old son. Troy and his girlfriend have both been intermittently employed. However, affordable child care creates a constant struggle for them. Travis completed his high school education and became employed at Stone Pony, a local restaurant in Clarksdale. After several months he was fired because of an issue with his shift manager. After being fired he was unable to find employment until he enrolled at Meraki. He has maintained his passion for cooking and presently works at another local restaurant in Clarksdale. He and his girlfriend shared a vehicle to travel to and from work.

Troy was a very positive participant at Meraki and rarely had any infractions on the standards chart. His greatest difficulty was arriving on time or at all. Whenever his girlfriend was interviewing for a job or going to work there were difficulties coordinating rides and childcare. Thus, Troy or his girlfriend would have to assume childcare duties rather than going to work. Excused absences were permitted at Meraki; however, he still received warnings because he would call in after he was supposed to have arrived at work. Multiple such instances at a regular job would have resulted in a termination; however, at Meraki we simply began cutting his pay. After gaining employment after the program, he had the same difficulties with childcare and transportation, and after several unexcused absences and persistent tardiness, he was terminated. Troy's employment was significantly impacted by the structural impediments of poverty. He and his girlfriend lacked the resources to find reliable transportation or childcare and thus were unable to successfully gain employment.

Carter was in his 20s. He graduated from high school with a certificate of completion. These certificates are issued to students with special needs after they have successfully attended and participated in the entire high school curriculum. However, he does not have a diploma or GED. He also does not have an official diagnosis that placed him in the special needs program at

school. Upon graduation he eagerly sought employment, but to no avail. He enrolled with Meraki and has been able to maintain sporadic employment at the animal shelter since then. He lived with his mother and occasionally stayed with friends in town. He has no means of transportation other than his bike, and occasionally seeking rides from friends.

Carter faced many challenges while he was at Meraki. The first difficulty he had was arriving on time to work on the appropriate days. He could not tell time and had irregular access to a cellphone. He easily lost track of the days in the week and therefore was easily confused as to when and where he was to report. It was apparent that he was genuinely trying to arrive on time. In an attempt to be fair and equitable, we penalized him as we would the other participants for his tardiness or absences; however, we also tried to provide the resources for him to be able to know the time and day.

Once at Meraki, Carter was an ardent participant who nonetheless did not always complete the tasks that were assigned. However he was rewarded for his effort and responded positively when he was told what he needed to be doing. He excelled at menial tasks, but required attention. Several months into the program he came across someone's phone at the Meraki program. Although he recognized that it was not his phone, he took it and left. The next day all of the participants were asked about the missing phone and he stated that he had taken the phone. When he was told that that was stealing, he said he understood, apologized, and returned the phone. However, since stealing was a serious infraction on the standards chart, he was suspended from the program. After the phone incident, Carter did not violate the standards chart again, other than minor infractions of tardiness or not wearing his uniform.

Upon employment at the Animal Shelter after Meraki, Carter received outstanding performance appraisals. The staff at the Animal Shelter was able to accommodate his needs by

giving him appropriate tasks and meaningful oversight. He remains employed part-time at the Animal Shelter and volunteers now at the Griot Arts after school program. He struggled with social psychological factors like controlling his attitude and evaluating the consequences of his personal actions in real time. These factors might be related to learning disabilities; however, due to the lack of resources in the educational system in the community and health resources available to Carter, he was still unable to be diagnosed and treated for the possible mental or learning disabilities. This will, in all likelihood, continue to limit the level of independence he can achieve.

Roger was in his 20s. He is a native of Tunica, Mississippi. He moved to Clarksdale in his youth and has resided there ever since. He also graduated from high school with a certificate of completion. His diagnosis was also unclear. Upon graduation he began searching for employment. He successfully found some odd jobs doing carpentry work with his uncle; however, these jobs were not sustainable or consistent. He enrolled with Meraki but was unable to find employment after leaving the program. He had no means of transportation and usually walked to Meraki from his home.

Roger was a dependable participant at Meraki. He was timely and prepared for work and had minimal infractions on the standards chart. He had a positive attitude while at work, and excelled the longer he was in the program. Several months into the program we visited local businesses in town. While visiting the machine shop Roger opened an employees' workstation and took their chips. The supervisor saw this on the cameras, and mentioned the occurrence to the director. We approached Roger about the chips and he admitted that he had consumed them but did not concede that he had taken them from the workstation, or opened the workstation at all. After being further questioned and asked to be honest, he continued to dispute that he had stolen anything or that he needed to apologize. He was expelled from the program because of the

infraction and lack of responsibility taken for his actions. He continues to live with his mother in Clarksdale, and remains unemployed.

The incident with the chips and Roger's time at Meraki demonstrated both social psychological and structural forces affecting Roger. Much like Carter, the educational system and health care available to Roger failed to provide the support necessary to accommodate his needs. Furthermore, social psychological factors affecting his sense of responsibility and his consideration for others' belongings, which affected his ability to remain employed. It was almost as if these behaviors had become normative experiences for him. The extent to which his learning disability or mental disability contributed to these actions or his inability to accept responsibility is unclear, but they reflected the social psychological factors often discovered during the job training program.

Lenny was in his 20s. He is a native of Memphis, Tennessee. He moved to Clarksdale when he was 8-years-old and has lived there since. He graduated from high school with his high school diploma. He became heavily involved in a gang before graduation and remained with them for some time post-graduation. He accumulated several charges engaging in gang related activities and was jailed for a short time. He was living with friends when he applied for Meraki. At the time of the interview, he denied any current involvement with the gang and seemed determined to participate in the program and find meaningful employment. However, several months into the program he was involved in a shooting in town in association with his gang, and he was charged and jailed for the murder of a guard at a local plant.

When Lenny first began at Meraki he struggled maintaining the objectives on the standards chart. He was regularly late and improperly dressed. His tardiness resulted in missing the distribution of the duties of the day or the lesson for the day, and thus he struggled throughout the

day to keep up with the activities. As we tried to work with Lenny on his tardiness and preparation for work, it came to our attention that he had no consistent home, and was therefore having trouble keeping track of his uniform. Since he walked to Meraki, his movement around town made it difficult for him to estimate the time it would take to get to Meraki.

In an effort to help mitigate some of these difficulties the director agreed to pick up Lenny on his way to Meraki in the mornings. This required Lenny to be ready to go earlier, but guaranteed that he was on time. The director also kept Lenny's uniform with him so that he could change once he arrived at Meraki. Lenny gave notice of his whereabouts in the evening and the director was able to pick him up in the mornings. Once this system was in place Lenny was no longer tardy or unprepared. His early arrivals at Meraki allowed him the time to catch up on any skills he was struggling with and grow more comfortable with the staff. As time went on Lenny became one of the top performing participants. He was prepared and eager to engage with the others. He grew confident in his ability to lead the others, and took on extra responsibilities whenever possible.

Several months into the program Lenny did not show up for work. He had not called in the day before to inform us of his whereabouts as well. Roger told the staff that Lenny had been arrested for a very serious crime. Due to the severity of the crime, Lenny was charged and given no bail. He was later convicted and still remains in prison. Understanding the sociological and economic forces impacting Roger went beyond the intervention of assisting him in organizational skills. There was a need to radically shift his social support system to create a strong social infrastructure.

Bob was in his 20s. He graduated from the local high school with honors. He lives with his mother and stepfather, who is a top law enforcement officer in the community. He has one brother and one sister. He has lived in the same home with his family for the past 10 years. Bob had trouble

maintaining employment after graduation because he was unable to pass a drug test. He enrolled with Meraki after being referred by a friend. However, after several months he was unable to pass several drug tests, and after a disciplinary notice, he decided to leave the program. Since leaving the program, he has been able to find some short term employment; however, he is currently unemployed.

Bob grew up in Clarksdale. He stayed on the safer side of town, and resided in a stable home. He had regular access to all of his immediate needs and had the resources at his disposal to go to college. While at Meraki, Bob quickly learned and applied the skills he was learning. He hardly ever committed an infraction on the standards chart. However, he only performed what was necessary and nothing more. He also did not engage much with the other participants.

As we began random drug tests, Bob immediately told us that he would not be able to pass the test. We had a three strike policy at Meraki and agreed to give him one strike and simply test him in 14 days, when everything would have passed through his system. He agreed to the strike and to the future drug test. Two weeks later he took and failed the drug test. We informed him that this was his second strike and that after the third he would have to leave the program. We waited another month before we performed another random drug test. Before taking this test, Bob again informed us that he would be unable to pass this test. We asked Bob to sit down and speak with us about this later that day. After work he spoke with us and decided that he would rather maintain his current habits than receive the small stipend from Meraki and remain sober. He has since remained unemployed and still resides with his family.

Andrew was in his 20s. He moved to Clarksdale when he was 10-years-old. He earned his high school diploma. While in high school he was the quarterback of the football team. Near graduation he became involved in a gang and lost his opportunities to play college football. Soon

after graduation he was arrested while engaging in a gang-related activity. Thereafter, he became determined to redirect the course of his life, and got out of the gang. He then enrolled at Meraki and became one of the strongest participants, with no disciplinary infractions. Near the end of the program, he received a call from an uncle in Florida offering him a job near Miami. He moved to Florida and successfully gained employment. He then enrolled at a local college and was working on his degree. He hoped to also have an opportunity to play football again while in school.

Andrew was a confident, determined participant at Meraki from the moment he began the program. He committed no infractions on the standards chart during the entirety of his time at Meraki. He always did more than what was expected of him and never challenged the staffs' authority. He also always offered a lending hand to his fellow participants and the staff. He openly stated that he realized he had made some mistakes becoming involved with the gang and missing out on an athletic career. He also expressed his determination to still go to college and receive another opportunity to play sports. He was given an opportunity to go to college and play sports once he moved to Florida, and he took advantage of it. He called several months after moving to tell the staff of his new job, academic, and athletic opportunities. He also said he did not have any intentions of ever coming back to Clarksdale.

While working at Meraki the participants worked on the two acre Meraki vegetable farm, completed various carpentry jobs in town, and worked at Oxbow restaurant. At the farm, the participants engaged in the entire farming process. They tilled up the soil and created the rows. Then they planted and tended to the vegetables as they grew. They harvested the vegetables, cleaned them, bagged them, and took them to local restaurants and the local farmers market. They built community gardens throughout Clarksdale.



In February and March 2015, the participants split into two groups and went into each elementary school and told the students about Meraki. They shared information about their jobs, why they got involved in the program, and what the students would see when they came and visited the farm. The participants then planted Kale in egg cartons with the students, and told them how to tend to the kale until they came out to the farm and planted it. Each group of participants established what they were going to say and how they wanted to structure the visit themselves, with some guidance from the staff. The participants were not very eager about the visit and nervous about having to speak to so many children.

However, once the participants got in front of the students they were enamored by the students' interest and excitement. They enjoyed having to answer questions asking exactly what they did on the farm, and really appreciated the "oohs and ahhs" they got from the students as they explained the tools they had to use and vegetables they had already grown successfully. The participants were impressed by the students' interest in kale and getting to plant some themselves, and this further motivated them in their demonstration before the students.

After the classroom visits the participants prepared for the school visits in April. The positive interaction in the classroom inspired the participants in their preparation for the farm visit. The participants were each instructed to lead a group of 8 students through the planting process on the farm. After planting the kale, the participants were instructed to give the students a tour of the farm and then gather everyone around for a picnic and games. The school visits happened over three days.

The participants were thrilled as the students arrived on the farm and realized that the students had all remembered who they were. They successfully planted the kale with their groups of students and provided a tour of the farm. In response to the eagerness with which the students

asked about their specific duties on the farm, the participants also walked the students through their work stations and tool shed. They then all chose to eat with the students rather than take the break that had been offered. Following lunch, the participants played soccer and kick ball with the students behind the farm. The successive visits went equally well, and after the last class departed the participants wanted to organize another trip.

The school trips were successful at reinforcing the skills that we were trying to instill in the participants. The standards chart rules about respecting authority, and doing exactly as told were applied by the participants with the students. And, as the participants reflected on their experiences with the students, they stated how they now realized why we enforced the rules we did on them. The school trip also gave the participants a sense of pride in the work they were doing and a sense of purpose. Although we regularly discussed the importance of healthy food and healthy living, teaching others about the concepts they had learned, and having those teachings met with eagerness by the students, greatly reinforced these messages to the participants. Following the school visit the participants were more intentional in their participation at Meraki and with growing the vegetables on the farm.

On the first Friday of the program, the participants received a brief financial training class. We discussed how to create a budget and identify upcoming expenses, the importance of saving, and how to open a bank account. None of the participants in the program had a bank account when they started the program. In conclusion to the financial class, the director took the participants to the local bank and each of the participants opened a checking account. The participants also created a three month plan and decided how much money they would try to save each week in order to have \$50 to open a savings account. Four of the participants successfully opened a savings account during their time at Meraki.

During the classes on Fridays the participants first learned about healthy eating and healthy living, and why we were choosing to work with the participants on a vegetable farm. We discussed food desserts and whether Clarksdale could be considered one. The participants understood our intentions but mentioned how they felt it was unrealistic for their family and friends to adopt a healthier lifestyle because those foods are often more expensive and just inaccessible. Furthermore, they said that no one would understand how to make those foods taste good and so it is a bigger issue than just farming the foods at Meraki.

Following the classes on food, we transitioned to classes on leadership and team building skills. These classes were primarily taught by various community leaders. These classes were also met with much skepticism by the participants. They believed they already understood the principles the speakers were going to address. As the speakers asked the participants to share what they believed teamwork or leadership meant, most of them did have a general understanding of what those principles were. However, they did not have an understanding of the importance of those skills in the context of their job. As the speakers created examples of circumstances in which teamwork helped and hindered a business the participants realized the importance of these principles.

The next set of classes were on Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. As an application of the skills learned in these classes, the participants developed their resumes in Microsoft Word. Only one of the participants had prior experience using these programs, and this participant's knowledge was still very limited. After completing the lessons and writing the resume, the participants learned about proper business attire, etiquette, and interviewing skills. Then, with their resumes in hand, they went to businesses and engaged in mock interviews to practice the skills they had just learned. The feedback from the businesses was overwhelming that the participants

lacked verbal skills to communicate effectively. The participants, however, were positively received as motivated and driven to put their best foot forward.

At the end of the program, the remaining participants all gained employment. Carter, Troy, and Jonathan were employed at the local animal shelter. Troy was also employed at a local restaurant on a part-time basis. Paul was hired as the manager of the local Cricket Wireless store. Jonathon quit working at the local animal shelter because he grew frustrated with his supervisor. He eventually found employment with a local carpentry crew, but left them for the same reasons. He remains unemployed. Troy eventually left the animal shelter for full employment with the local restaurant. Carter remains employed part-time at the animal shelter and volunteers some of his time at Griot Arts Inc.

#### *Follow-up Interviews with Participants*

During the interviews with participants, all of them indicated that they felt that money would help them, and that employment could provide the funds to support themselves. They identified needing funds to pay for a place to live, to pay for bills, to be able to buy themselves things they wanted, and to buy food. Furthermore, they all identified employment as essential for their life success. However, those who were unemployed were skeptical that they could ever achieve this. Paul and Troy were hesitant to assume that they would be able to maintain their employment and continue to work up the ranks in their jobs if they stayed in Clarksdale. Andrew was the only participant that believed he could and would achieve the successful life he desired. He attributed this capacity to the fact that he now lived in Florida.

When the participants were asked why they did not believe they would not be able to achieve their desired lifestyle in Clarksdale they gave three reasons. The first was the need to “know people” in order to succeed in the community. These people included the mayor or other

business owners in the community. Without a relationship to these leaders, the participants felt there were only lateral employment moves available, if you were so lucky as to gain employment at all. The participants felt that their current employment and opportunities for employment were even a result of such connections. They felt that the director of the program, being a white native of the community, whose family members were successful farmers and affluent community members, was the reason they had been hired. The participants believed had they not established these connections with the director, even with the skills learned at Meraki, they would have been denied their jobs.

The second reason that the participants gave was the racial tensions in the community. The participants indicated that all of the business owners were white. Those with the power to hire and fire them, and to determine how much they were paid were white. And, they believed because they were black, they were automatically at a disadvantage. They felt they were automatically seen as less capable. The opportunities and second chances that might be afforded to a white employee would not be afforded to them.

They also believed that since the white business owners wanted to make as much money as possible, they hired black employees at minimum wage. To them the owners invested little in their black employees and fired them as soon as something went wrong. “They can do this because there are so many of us [African Americans] who are only qualified for those [minimum wage] jobs.” The participants further stated that the businesses in town that were run by African American community members struggled with the rest of the white business community and did not make nearly as much money as the white owners. Therefore, they could not afford to employ many other African Americans, nor try to facilitate greater employment for black residents.

Finally, participants identified education as a limiting factor for their employment. Lack of a good education not only limited their employment opportunities in the community; it is what restricted them from ever being able to leave, unless a family or friend connection presented itself. One participant indicated that the lack of education was correlated to why most of his friends lacked the ability to change. “If we had gotten a good education then we could adapt to the change that is happening in jobs outside of Clarksdale.” Several participants felt that the education in the public school system was purposely underfunded and inappropriate in order to keep black people in this cycle of poverty. All of the participants believed that the expectation and application of their education in the workplace was appropriate, but felt that they had not received anything worthwhile in school that they could take to the workplace. To them this educational gap was what justified their being “less” in the eyes of the white business owners and community members. All of these factors ultimately made all of the participants feel helpless and unmotivated by their standard of living, and that sustainable employment might not ever happen. These were strong social psychological factors inhibiting progress, whether they were actually real or not. The consequences for these respondents became detrimental in their minds.

The participants who lived with friends while seeking employment indicated that such living arrangements always made them feel unsettled and distracted. “I couldn’t pay attention because I was thinking about where my stuff was at and where I was going tonight.” Furthermore, they indicated that staying with friends made them less motivated to work. Since the majority of friends were also unemployed, it was easy to just “kick it” with them all day, sleep in, ride around, and continue to feel stuck in their situation. Living with friends also displaced their sense of ownership over their lives. This made the sense of self and the motivation to manage their own responsibilities more difficult to imagine.

Although only one participant had a dependent, all of the participants indicated that one factor limiting employment for them and other community members was lack of affordable childcare. This reality, coupled with the perception that only minimum wage jobs would be made available to them, restricted their imagination of ever being able to provide for a family, as well as to maintain it. Those participants that were able to assume some of their responsibilities through gaining employment, such as paying for their own place and getting a car, and paying the bills associated with those items, shared how a minimum wage job and the stipends they received from Meraki would not have been able to provide this support. They were presently able to fulfill their responsibilities because they had received a deal on rent or car payments through a connection from Meraki. Lastly, several participants indicated that reliable transportation was unavailable in the community. This created difficulties attempting to arrive to work on time or at all. Paul and Troy shared how their ownership of a car had not reduced the transportation burden for them due to the costs of constant maintenance and upkeep on the vehicles.

The immediate family of six of the eight participants was unemployed. The two participants whose immediate family was employed were not able to maintain employment themselves. Of the four participants that were able to maintain employment, one primarily resided with his immediate family during his youth and time at Meraki. One resided with his girlfriend and child for the duration of the program. The other two participants resided with various friends, none of whom were permanently employed. The housing with friends, in which they resided, was paid for by government assistance that the minor of the household was receiving.

These findings highlight the social psychological and structural significance of the broader community's impact on individuals seeking employment. The evidence discovered in the Meraki job training program makes possible that unhealthy behaviors were not always driven by

consciously held intentions. The weaknesses of the social infrastructure in the larger community are some of the factors competing with volitional control. Therefore, although recommendations will be made to address these social psychological factors in future workforce development programs, community leaders, businesses, and policy makers should be cautious about assigning blame at the individual level. It became apparent leading this job training program that these individuals were reacting to powerful forces beyond their immediate control.

Next, I will discuss how community and business leaders perceive the greater Delta region, and how these perceptions factor into the overall social constructions of the communities throughout the region.

#### *McLean Institute Delta Leadership Survey*

These secondary data were utilized to explore more deeply this idea of these negative perceptions of poverty impacting people throughout the Delta region. As the previous findings indicated, the participants in the job training program were mostly unable to take advantage of an opportunity to increase their job skills and become employed. The primary reasons were related to the social psychological and structural forces beyond their immediate control. The earlier literature posited that functional leaders and leadership structures were critical for positive community and economic development. Too many times community leaders develop exclusive control over community decision making, with little input from the community residents. Thus, a full understanding of the day-to-day survival of the individuals described in the previous section is not achieved, with the obvious reaction and/or conclusion being one of personal blame.

The data from the leadership study provide additional support for understanding the perceptions of poverty and how to solve it. This study captured the views of 335 Delta leaders on programs or policy changes that could facilitate economic development. It is interesting to note



that almost 54% of Delta leaders disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that most people in poverty do not try hard enough to improve their conditions (see Table 3). These findings are positive in that most leaders in the region agree that the challenges surrounding poverty, and its causes, go beyond the efforts of impoverished individual persons. Consistent with this finding is the fact that 78% of leaders agreed or strongly agreed that “there are forces beyond people’s individual level of control that contribute to poverty.”

**Table 3: Delta Leaders’ Perceptions of Poverty (%)**

|   | <b>Strongly Disagree</b> | <b>Disagree</b> | <b>Neutral</b>  | <b>Agree</b>   | <b>Strongly Agree</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| “Education is the most important factor for helping people get out of poverty.”   | 1%<br>(n=3)              | 1%<br>(n=3)     | 4%<br>(n=11)    | 39%<br>(n=114) | 56%<br>(n=165)        | 296          |
| “The poor quality of public schools contributes to poverty.”  | 2%<br>(n=6)              | 14%<br>(n=41)   | 17%<br>(n=50)   | 43%<br>(n=128) | 24%<br>(n=70)         | 295          |
| “When someone increases their level of education, it is more likely that they will pursue opportunities outside of the Delta region.” | 1%<br>(n=3)              | 7.5%<br>(n=22)  | 18%<br>(n=52)   | 53%<br>(n=155) | 21%<br>(n=60)         | 292          |
| “Even if someone increases their level of education, it is unlikely that they will get a better job.”                                 | 20%<br>(n=59)            | 54%<br>(n=160)  | 12%<br>(n=36)   | 12%<br>(n=35)  | 2%<br>(n=5)           | 295          |
| “Most people in poverty do not try hard enough to improve their conditions.”  | 16%<br>(n=47)            | 38%<br>(n=112)  | 24%<br>(n=70)   | 19%<br>(n=56)  | 3%<br>(n=10)          | 295          |
| “There are not enough well-paying jobs.”  | 4%<br>(n=11)             | 13%<br>(n=39)   | 16%<br>(n=46)   | 41%<br>(n=121) | 26%<br>(n=77)         | 294          |
| “There are not enough jobs.”  | 3%<br>(n=9)              | 22%<br>(n=65)   | 14%<br>(n=42)   | 43%<br>(n=128) | 17%<br>(n=51)         | 295          |
| “Nonprofit service organizations should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”  | 1%<br>(n=2)              | 6%<br>(n=19)    | 24%<br>(n=69)   | 53%<br>(n=155) | 16%<br>(n=48)         | 293          |
| “Colleges and universities should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”  | 1%<br>(n=4)              | 7%<br>(n=22)    | 15.5%<br>(n=46) | 51%<br>(n=152) | 24%<br>(n=72)         | 296          |

|  |               |                 |               |                |                 |     |
|--|---------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|-----|
| “Churches should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”                          | 1%<br>(n=3)   | 3%<br>(n=9)     | 17%<br>(n=50) | 51%<br>(n=151) | 28%<br>(n=81)   | 294 |
| “Government should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”                        | 3%<br>(n=10)  | 15.5%<br>(n=46) | 20%<br>(n=59) | 38%<br>(n=113) | 23%<br>(n=68)   | 296 |
| “Businesses should be more involved in helping to address poverty.”                        | 1%<br>(n=4)   | 7%<br>(n=21)    | 21%<br>(n=62) | 45%<br>(n=131) | 26%<br>(n=76)   | 294 |
| “People generally help each other to improve quality of life.”                             | .34%<br>(n=1) | 14.5%<br>(n=43) | 25%<br>(n=75) | 55%<br>(n=163) | 5%<br>(n=14)    | 296 |
| “Economic inequality is a major problem that needs special attention.”                     | 2.3%<br>(n=7) | 12.5%<br>(n=37) | 17%<br>(n=51) | 37%<br>(n=110) | 30.5%<br>(n=90) | 295 |
| “Policy changes are needed to reduce poverty rates.”                                       | 1%<br>(n=4)   | 12%<br>(n=36)   | 17%<br>(n=49) | 44%<br>(n=128) | 26%<br>(n=77)   | 294 |
| “There are forces beyond people’s individual level of control that contribute to poverty.” | 2%<br>(n=6)   | 8%<br>(n=23)    | 12%<br>(n=35) | 49%<br>(n=143) | 30%<br>(n=87)   | 294 |
| “Too many single-parent families lead to greater poverty.”                                 | 2%<br>(n=6)   | 14%<br>(n=40)   | 17%<br>(n=49) | 45%<br>(n=131) | 23%<br>(n=68)   | 294 |

In response to the question about the most important issues to address in order to combat poverty, community leaders identified the following factors as important (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Issues Important to Combat Poverty**

Based on your experience, what is/are the most important issue(s) to address in order to combat poverty? Please select all that apply:

|   | Count     |
|---|-----------|
| Mismatch between skills/education and available job opportunities | 204 (69%) |
| Mismatch between location of available jobs and workers           | 124 (42%) |
| Prevalence of low wage work                                       | 156 (53%) |
| Low levels of financial literacy                                  | 193 (65%) |
| Limited access to bank accounts/credit unions                     | 37 (13%)  |
| Limited access to affordable credit options                       | 56 (19%)  |
| Lack of affordable housing  | 103 (35%) |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Low levels of educational attainment/high school dropout rate | 233 (79%) |
| Cost of higher education                                      | 144 (49%) |
| Limited access to healthcare/health insurance                 | 123 (42%) |
| Legacy of racial inequality                                   | 127 (43%) |
| Other (please describe):                                      | 46 (16%)  |
| Total   | 295       |

These responses validate the findings regarding the social psychological factors affecting individuals that were identified through the analysis of the participants from Meraki. Individuals who were involved in and familiar with Delta communities but unaffected by the structural impediments of poverty observed the same social psychological factors found in the study of Meraki. Thus, which issues must be addressed in order to promote community and economic growth are clear. However the responses to address these issues are less clear.

When asked based on your experience, how do you think we can strengthen economic opportunity in the Delta region the majority of responses given by leaders addressed workforce development. Here are some quotes from the findings.

|  |
|--|
| By providing more workforce development and improving educational systems.   |
| Bringing more jobs with a higher income value to these areas. BUT - there must be qualified workers for said jobs -EDUCATION is the key!   |
| By training children through vocational programs at local universities and through the high school. By providing better pay for jobs. By educating people in the work force to be able to perform jobs that are being developed in our future economy. |

|  |
|--|
| Having good paying jobs in the area, such as the ones in Oklahoma and Nebraska in the oil industry. If good paying lower skilled work is available, this elevates the economy and brings in other more skilled or educational opportunistic employment. The disability rolls shrink because many see that they can make more working and have more pride in their circumstances than staying on the government rolls. Children are reared with working role models and therefore expect to work as well as gain an education to better themselves. |
| Job training; tax credits for employers who hire people of poverty.  |
| Work with businesses to offer job training programs with jobs that pay a living wage.  |
| Make holding a job more attractive than government handouts.   |
| Businesses willing to go into poverty challenged areas, provide opportunities for job skill training, and then hiring local workers at good pay is essential. The belief in the possibility of a better way of life is necessary in these communities.   |
| Providing skill training in areas job demand.  |
| Based on my experience, I think we can strengthen economic opportunity in the Delta region by creating a skill and community effective workforce   |
| Add more jobs that pay competitive wages.....add jobs that are closer to communities that have the highest poverty rates.  |
| Provide more educational and work counseling and on the job training. Also provide more advocacy for vocational training   |
| I think we can strengthen economic opportunity through job training programs and school to work programs.  |
| By educating our workforce   |
| Job training with younger people   |
| Having more higher paying jobs in our area   |
| Increase in middle income jobs; more job training programs in the low-income rural areas   |
| A living wage is incredibly important, as is creating job opportunities that offer workers living wages, health benefits, and the ability to thrive.   |

Mobilizing an uneducated workforce in order to promote economic development in the poverty stricken Delta communities is an agreed upon issue for leaders in the communities. However a couple of responses included policy level changes that addressed funding for schools, healthcare, and tax incentives for businesses. Responses include:

- Government HAS to create a business friendly climate by removing barriers such as high taxes and high unemployment and/or workers comp rates. Now, we added "affordable healthcare" onto businesses, which will burden the private sector yet again.
- More focus on development regions and inter-governmental cooperation.

Several leaders believed the issues to be addressed were a result of the level of engagement of community members.

- It has to come from within each community. "We" from government can't fix the problems, nor will more money.
- Develop can-do attitudes.

The findings present a mixed message, with some of the institutional factors for assisting the poor to be opposed by the selected leaders, such as cash and food assistance. Yet 67% of the respondents support increasing the minimum wage. This can be observed in the responses of leaders to the list of actions the government could take that some people believe could directly help the poor in the Delta region (see Table 5).

Table 5: How Delta Leaders Believe the Government Can Assist the Poor

| Question   | Support   | Oppose    | Total |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Increasing the minimum wage                                  | 179 (67%) | 87 (33%)  | 266   |
| Increasing the tax credits for low income workers            | 218 (83%) | 44 (17%)  | 262   |
| Increasing cash assistance for families                      | 72 (28%)  | 182 (72%) | 254   |
| Expanding subsidized daycare                                 | 221 (82%) | 47 (18%)  | 268   |
| Spending more for medical care for poor people               | 162 (61%) | 102 (39%) | 264   |
| Spending more for housing for poor people                    | 154 (59%) | 105 (41%) | 259   |
| Increasing the amount of food stamp benefits for poor people | 101 (39%) | 155 (61%) | 256   |
| Increasing the availability of student loans                 | 207 (78%) | 58 (22%)  | 265   |

Although the leaders agreed that there should be a strong social infrastructure to support those living in poverty in the previous questions, they support predominantly economic initiatives. There

is little indication for the need to address the social psychological factors that affect individuals as a result of the reasons causing individuals to live in poverty. As mentioned, the cash assistance and food stamps were negatively viewed. However, greater income stability and food reliability are factors that the leaders self-identified as critical for helping individuals get out of poverty. These findings demonstrate that the concept of helping transition individuals out of poverty must consider the economic and sociological context as well as social psychological needs of the individual in order to create lasting change.

## **V. Conclusion**

There are currently few adequate workforce development programs available to young adults in the Mississippi Delta that provide a framework through which participants can become sustainably employed members of the community. The programs available address mostly the economic desires of employers, without addressing the sociological and social psychological factors affecting participants. A workforce development program that intends to transition participants into full time employment must address both needs in order to create a sustainable impact on the participants and the community.

The social psychological factors limiting workforce development were observed through the case study of the participants of the Meraki Job Training Program. Those perceptions were then augmented by the data from the Delta community leaders in the Mclean Leadership study. Each participant of Meraki struggled to become fully employed, although most were able to master the hard skills taught in the program. To the extent to which the participant had a strong social infrastructure available to them through family or friends, they were able to overcome some of the barriers more easily. The success stories of two participants demonstrate the impact a strong social infrastructure can have in transitioning individuals out of poverty through workforce development.

The Meraki participants and community leaders identified transportation, inadequate wages, housing, affordable childcare, poor educational resources, and lack of resources as structural impediments of individuals trying to move out of poverty. These structural forces established negative attitudinal patterns such as lack of motivation, hopelessness, and lack of trust in authorities. These attitudinal patterns then promote and enhance the realities of unemployment, increased delinquency, disrespect for authority, and lack of commitment. Additionally, these factors clearly contribute to the reasons that young adults in impoverished communities remain

unemployed. These normative patterns reflect more broadly community brokenness, describing many communities throughout the Delta. Understanding the cause and effect of these larger community forces, which limit the effectiveness of workforce development, is essential in order to establish effective workforce development programs.

Due to the interconnectivity of the issues limiting workforce development, a program that promotes workforce development needs to holistically address each of the structural impediments as well accommodate participants as they overcome the social psychological barriers. There are a variety of ways in which each issue can be addressed, and an individual dealing with these issues can be supported through a workforce development program. Providing reliable transportation, stable housing, affordable childcare, and resources in case of unexpected expenses are necessary resources that can help participants of a workforce development program.

In order for participants to overcome the social psychological barriers they must be accommodated academically so that they can adapt and become productive and flexible employees of an increasingly technological workforce. Participants should be provided mentorship and support as they navigate new constructive lifestyles, habits, and responsibilities. The transitional support of the workforce development program must exceed a year so that participants have adequate time to learn new habits and practices of engaging in work, with others, and in the community.

Lastly, the program ought to recognize the historical divides that prevail in Delta communities. The existing programmatic components of many workforce development initiatives are not structured to consider these broader realities. The disadvantages participants encounter impact their success in the program. Feeling perpetually at a disadvantage has a powerful outcome on absenteeism, high turnover, low productivity, and low morale. One solution is to create personal



empowerment through building strong social infrastructures, and working to transform individuals' self-identities. This transformation takes time and investment through lasting relationships and dedication to the participant. This support should be made available through community involvement and partnerships between the community, the workforce development program, and businesses.

Commitment on part of businesses will be necessary in order to support a successful workforce development program. Community engagement and development further provide a conducive context in which a workforce development program can thrive by reinforcing the positive intentions of the program. The more that participants feel ownership in their community, the more they have to work for in the program. That ownership and sense of self is what motivates people and gives them hope and purpose.

In deeply impoverished communities, increasing an individual's aspirations by rebuilding their self-concept might be an objective of a workforce development program. This objective should complement the practical skills and job training component of traditional workforce development programs to prepare participants for employment. This holistic integrated approach will provide the framework through which participants can become sustainably employed. This holistic and integrated approach to transcending poverty functions like a sustainable ecosystem; it is resilient, diverse, welcomes collaboration, relies on local inputs, and sustains itself by reintegrating outputs back into the community while maintaining partnerships with organizations and systems outside the community (Gliessman, 2007).

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## **Appendix**

### **Consent Form**

#### **Consent to Participate in Study:**

##### **Impact of Financial Backing for Afterschool Programs in the Mississippi Delta**

###### **Investigator**

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☒ By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

###### **The purpose of this study**

The purpose of this study is to consider work force development programs, particularly in the Mississippi Delta. By analyzing the results of the Meraki Job Training Program in Clarksdale, Mississippi and looking at other similar programs nationwide, this study will propose a holistic approach that creates sustainable employment for individuals in impoverished communities.

###### **What you will do for this study**

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes total. I will ask you questions related to the research question. During the interview, I will take notes for reference purposes as well as audio record the interview with your consent. If you do not wish to be recorded, you can decline and the interview will only have hand written notes.

###### **Time required for this study**

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

###### **Possible risks from your participation**

In this study, you will not have any more risks that you would in a normal day of life. You are free to pause or stop at any point during the interview.

###### **Benefits from your participation**

You should not expect benefits from participating in this study. However, you might experience satisfaction from contributing to public knowledge regarding the importance of workforce development programs. Also, the survey may contribute to increased funding over time.

### **Confidentiality**

We will keep your interview private to the extent allowed by law. Printed data will only be stored in cabinet that can be opened with a key. All electronic recordings will be saved in secure hard drives. Elena Bauer Kozielski, Dr. Albert Nylander, and Dr. JR Love will have access to the data to be used for educational purposes.

### **Right to Withdraw**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during this interview.

### **IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, then decide if you want to be in the study or not.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have been given an unsigned copy of this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and I have received answers. By completing this interview, I consent to participate in the study.

**From:** [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu)

**Sent:** Monday, March 20, 2017 11:24 AM

**To:** Elena Bauer <[ebauer@go.olemiss.edu](mailto:ebauer@go.olemiss.edu)>; Albert Nylander <[nylander@olemiss.edu](mailto:nylander@olemiss.edu)>

**Subject:** FW: IRB Exempt Approval of 17x-187

### **Jennifer Caldwell, PhD, CPIA, CIP**

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Ms. Kozielski:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, “[An Evaluation of the Social Psychological Factors Impacting Workforce Development Programs](#)” (Protocol #17x-187), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi’s human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.
- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.
- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

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|                |  |             |                                     |
|----------------|--|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>From</b>    | olemissirb@gmail.com on behalf of Ole Miss IRB | <b>Date</b> | Monday, October 07, 2013 9:45:07 AM |
| <b>To</b>      | Albert Nylander                                |             |                                     |
| <b>Cc</b>      |  |             |                                     |
| <b>Subject</b> | IRB Approval of 14x-063                        |             |                                     |



Dr. Nylander:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, "McLean Institute Leadership Study of Poverty in the MS Delta Region" (Protocol #14x-063), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi's human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

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If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

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