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Entreprenurial leadership classes taught in three Mississippi counties

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OXFORD, Miss. – Nearly 60 elementary and middle school students in Mississippi have been exposed to entrepreneurial leadership skills this summer, thanks to a traveling program sponsored by the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement at the University of Mississippi.

The Entrepreneurial Learning Center began meeting in Charleston in late May. It moved to Marks in June and to Vardaman for mid-July and August. Sessions lasted about four hours a day for four weeks in each location.

Rising sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in Charleston were introduced to various health care topics at the request of Dr. Catherine Woodyard, executive director of the local James C. Kennedy Wellness Center.

"Dr. Woodyard, who has worked with the McLean Institute for several years, asked us if we would consider coming to Charleston," said J.R. Love, project manager for McLean's Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, or CEED, program. "We’re touching on everything from exercise to diseases, and what it looks like to get into the health care profession as a doctor or nurse."

Community partners from local health care-related enterprises, including a pharmacist and business owner, served as guest presenters. The goal is that students are continuously learning, developing healthy habits and participating in experiences that build an entrepreneurial mindset.

"The goals of ELC were to provide a transformative experience for our participants and increase knowledge on the concepts of entrepreneurship," said Robert Patterson, a CEED Innovation Fellow and graduate student from Como. "I believe that this program did successfully meet its goals in promoting entrepreneurship and establishing community development."

Allison Ford-Wade, UM professor of health, exercise science and recreation management, described the inaugural ELC as "a wonderful experience."

The local students said that they learned a lot during the program.

"I learned a lot about health and starting a business," said Terrance Marco, of Charleston.

The Mississippi Development Authority assisted Nash Nunnery, project manager at MDA’s Entrepreneur Center, with providing valuable tools for the students in Charleston and Marks.

One of the guest, Allen Kurr, vice president of the Oxford-Lafayette County Economic Development Foundation, shared with students in Vardaman about the importance of building your brand in business.

Danna Johnson, program coordinator of Catholic Charities in Vardaman, said the ELC-Vardaman "Victory Project" is exciting.
"Eric Williams from Orange Theory Fitness in Oxford was invited to the camp and made a presentation to the students about health and wellness," she said.

CEED students worked in Marks this summer to establish an Entrepreneurial Learning Center and will continue to work this fall with community members and students in Quitman County. There, County Administrator Velma Wilson worked with CEED students on economic development projects, such as the upcoming Amtrak stop in Marks.

The ELC idea and model were created by the CEED initiative. CEED students are funded through a financial gift from the Robert M. Hearin Support Foundation.

"We are fortunate to have financial support from the Hearin foundation in allowing UM students to connect their desire to see jobs created in Mississippi at the local and state level," said Albert Nylander, McLean Institute director and professor of sociology.

"Community development, economic development and education were the guiding principles that each of the ELCs was built upon," Love said. "All of this connects to the work of George McLean, the late owner of the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal who started the CREATE Foundation, and Vaughn Grisham, the founding director of the McLean Institute in 1984."