M Partner Summer Interns Tackle Quality-of-Life Projects in Lexington

Taylor Robertson

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LEXINGTON, Miss. – This summer, University of Mississippi students completed internships in communities across the state working through M Partner, a community engagement effort that seeks to improve quality of life in partner cities.

In Lexington, two University of Mississippi students worked on promoting healthy eating habits in the community through the local farmers market and hosted resume and career workshops, among other initiatives.

M Partner offers a framework for community and university representatives to advance priority projects in partner cities across the state. The initiative is central to the university’s mission of learning, discovery and engagement.

Health Promotion at the Lexington Farmers Market

M Partner summer programming began June 1 with a free health fair, conducted as part of a garage sale hosted by the Community Student Learning Center. Vokay Addoh, UM assistant professor of health promotion, and his students provided health screenings, resources for managing pre-diabetes and smoking cessation, and information for students considering careers in the health fields.

For six weeks in June and July, Kymerle Gordon, a third-year doctoral student studying nutrition, worked alongside Lexington Mayor Robin McCrory; Paige Lawrence, assistant administrator and chief nursing officer of UM Medical Center-Holmes County; and former extension agent Algenia Adams to promote the local farmers market.

The Lexington farmers market is unique in that it has an indoor location, which makes it an ideal gathering place during the hot summer months for growers and customers to connect and build community. One of the goals of the internship was to identify ways to attract new growers and customers to expand the market’s reach.

“I do believe that the way to improve consumption of local fresh produce and goods is through engagement with hardworking growers such as those at the Lexington farmers market and promotion of their knowledge, as well as their delicious harvests,” said Gordon, from Canandaigua, New York.

“The six weeks I spent working with the Lexington farmers market was...
UM graduate student Kymberle Gordon worked with the Lexington Farmers Market Improvement Initiative to develop surveys for farmers, interview growers and customers of the market, and conduct produce assessments.

Results of Gordon’s research show that the key to improving the market is increased communication with community market vendors, getting more vendors to participate and encouraging more patrons to the market through social media outreach to Lexington and the surrounding communities.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know each of the growers who participate in the farmers market on a weekly basis,” Gordon said. “Their insight is so unique, and the knowledge I gained from our conversations is priceless.”

Resume and Career Workshops with Lexington Youth

Curtis Hills, an senior majoring in English and an innovation scholar with the McLean Institute’s Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development initiative, developed and facilitated several resume and career-building workshops to local youth at the Community Student Learning Center and the Nollie Jenkins Family Center.

As a graduate of Holmes County Central High School, Hills’ presence as an Ole Miss student and M Partner intern sent an important message to local youth to set high expectations for their own educational and career aspirations.

“The students taught me the value of building community,” Hills said. “A conversation can’t travel far without trust, and I was humbled that the students insisted I gain their trust.”

Hills taught dozens of middle school and high school youth professional skills that will help them be more competitive applicants for scholarships, colleges and jobs. The workshops engaged students in resume building and critiques and mock interviews, and encouraged them to consider how their skills and passions align with different career areas.

Building Sustainable Partnerships

Gordon’s work promoting access to healthful, local produce and Hills’ resume and career workshops can be sustained through the ongoing partnership between the McLean Institute and the Boys & Girls Club of Lexington.

Through the North Mississippi VISTA Project, another community partnership initiative housed at the McLean Institute, one full-time VISTA member and one summer associate have served with the Boys & Girls Club of Lexington.

VISTA member Latara Pitchford is serving a yearlong term and working to increase college access for Holmes County Central High School graduates, while VISTA summer associate Tawanna Jefferson worked to advance summer learning by working directly with students to develop literacy and mathematics skills.