

HELPING STUDENTS PREVENT UNPLANNED PREGNANCY AT MISSISSIPPI COLLEGES

Senate Bill No. 2563

Senate Bill No. 2563, passed by the Mississippi legislature and signed by Governor Phil Bryant during the 2014 legislative session, was the first legislation of its kind designed to reduce teen pregnancies among older teens age 18–19, the age group with one of the highest rates of unplanned pregnancy. In Mississippi, more than seven in 10 pregnancies to teens are among girls 18–19, and 62 percent are unplanned.¹

To reach older teens, the legislature identified higher education as an innovative and effective avenue to reach this audience. The legislation directed the Commissioner of Higher Education and the Executive Director of the Mississippi Community College Board to develop a plan of action to address the prevention of unintended pregnancies among older teens on Mississippi college and university campuses. In April 2015, the legislature appropriated a total of \$250,000 in the fiscal year 2016 budget for community colleges to address unplanned pregnancy. In January 2017, colleges were notified that they would receive additional funding—this time from the Mississippi Department of Human Services with available Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant funds.

As colleges strive to improve student success and completion, helping students align their behavior and intentions related to pregnancy planning can empower them to reach their educational goals. More specifically, providing information about topics related to pregnancy planning as well as support and connection to health services are important for helping students align their pregnancy planning behavior and intentions. However, pregnancy planning and prevention is not something most colleges—especially community colleges—address. Mississippi has been a leader in changing this.

It is also the case that work to provide students with information and access to services related to pregnancy planning and prevention can make it easier for students to stay in and complete college. Research shows that students often harbor myths, misinformation, and magical thinking about contraception and pregnancy planning, putting them at risk for unplanned pregnancy.² A Mississippi survey found that 38 percent of female community college students who dropped out say becoming pregnant or having a baby is the reason they dropped out.³

“HAVING TWO KIDS THAT ARE IN MY CARE ON A DAILY BASIS COMPLICATES GETTING TO SCHOOL, HOMEWORK, HAVING RELATIONSHIPS, EVERY OTHER ACTIVITY I WOULD LIKE TO DO... IT TAKES THE BACKSEAT BECAUSE WHEN YOU HAVE TWO PEOPLE THAT ARE ENTIRELY RELIANT ON YOU FOR EVERYTHING, IT'S REWARDING BUT IT IS DRAINING. AND GOING TO COLLEGE IS AN ENORMOUS TASK, IT'S SO MUCH HARDER THAN YOU IMAGINED, WITH THE ADDITION OF RAISING CHILDREN.”

—Female student

Implementing Sexual Health Best Practices

Thanks to generous funding from the Women's Foundation of Mississippi, Power to Decide, the campaign to prevent unplanned pregnancy, was able to work with four colleges—Copiah-Lincoln Community College, East Mississippi Community College, Hinds Community College, and Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College—to provide technical assistance, trainings, and support with their program planning and implementation.

A key element of these partnerships was to use a framework of best practices for campus sexual health along with a quality-improvement process that encourages cross collaboration and partnership across the campus. A key benefit of the best practice framework is that it allows colleges to identify no- and low-cost strategies that they can pursue for improving outcomes for their students. Colleges were encouraged to pursue strategies that would improve student connections to health care services in their community, but could choose the specific strategy or strategies that would be the best fit for their college and community.

Online Education for Students

A key best practice that colleges selected was providing formal education to students about sexual health, including the full range of birth control methods, as well as locations at the college or in the community where students could access these contraceptive methods, including condoms. All four campuses offered Power to Decide's online lessons, Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy and Completing College, which were designed to help college students be thoughtful about pregnancy planning and complete their education.

Each college used a different strategy to recruit students to complete the online lessons. At Hinds Community College, the lessons were included in orientation courses. At Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, the lessons were an assignment in a personal and community health course. East Mississippi Community College recruited 18 instructors from various courses that agreed to offer the lessons within their courses. Copiah-Lincoln took a different approach and incentivized taking the lessons. Specifically, the instructor with the most completions among students in their classes received a gift card; the first five students who completed the lessons received a gift basket; and the club and organization with the most participants received a pizza party.

Overall, students appreciated the information provided through the lessons. After taking them, students were more likely to report they used a method of birth control in the last month compared to pre-lesson surveys. They were also more likely to say they would consider using a different method of birth control in the future after taking the online modules, particularly the most effective methods such as the IUD or implant.

**"ALTHOUGH I THOUGHT
I KNEW A GOOD BIT ABOUT THIS TOPIC,
I FOUND TONS MORE INFORMATION
THAT I DID NOT KNOW OR I KNEW
INCORRECTLY."**

– MGCCC female student, age 30–40,
after completing the online lessons

**"THESE LESSONS WERE VERY
INFORMATIVE, AND I REALLY LEARNED
ABOUT HOW TO PREVENT PREGNANCY,
THE METHODS, AND HOW TO MAKE AN
ACTION PLAN."**

– Hinds female student, age 18–19,
after completing the online lessons

Additional Strategies

Colleges selected additional best practice strategies based on their needs and priorities. Each chose policies and strategies that will provide them with the foundation to continue this initiative into future years.

Copiah-Lincoln Community College

Co-Lin identified multiple sexual health best practices to address in their action plan that were in line with the college's priorities. Activities included:

- Reviewing and establishing policies related to Title IX and sexual assault.
- Establishing a referral policy to connect students to health services in the community and on campus, including offering screening days on campus and enhanced partnership with the Mississippi Department of Health and Teen Health Mississippi.
- Hosting multiple events at key times, such as Valentine's Day and Spring Fling, to raise awareness among students about the topic.
- Establishing a student task force of volunteers to help plan and lead campus activities.
- Ensuring both faculty and staff receive education and information about available health services.

As part of their future plans, they will continue with these successful activities as well as collaborate with instructors to explore how best to expand classes to incorporate more information about preventing unplanned pregnancy.

East Mississippi Community College

Key activities at EMCC included:

- Creating a Community Health Coalition with agencies that serve their students.
- Developing resources and materials for students to highlight services from community partners.
- Sharing information directly to students with print materials available in bathroom stalls.

Future plans at EMCC include continuing to use the online lessons, distributing the materials highlighting services from community partners, and seeking additional funding.

Hinds Community College

Key activities at Hinds included:

- Having an educational wellness fair.
- Implementing a series of talks called "Smart & Sexy Sessions."
- Distributing condoms (with consent and proper usage instructions) as well as information about contraception, supporting peer education about HIV prevention, and dispelling sexual myths.
- Getting faculty and staff involved.

Future plans include supporting student-led efforts, displaying brochures and information at an identified location on the main campus, and expanding the partnership with the Single Stop program, which helps connect students to a variety of community resources.

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College

Key activities at MGCCC included:

- Adding an amendment in their Health and Wellness statement specifically about addressing unplanned pregnancy, to help sustain their efforts beyond the scope of this grant.
- Working with their on-campus health services provider, Medical Analysis, to identify September as Unplanned Pregnancy Awareness Month and releasing a calendar showing that free condoms are available during business hours.
- Facilitating a health fair and residence hall programming.
- Using educational flyers and posters, as well as posting information on the closed-circuit TV and movie channel.

Future plans at MGCCC include continuing to work with Medical Analysis, facilitating a spring health fair, leveraging social media to raise awareness, exploring options for expanding additional content in orientation, and working with their Student Government Association to take on preventing unplanned pregnancy as a topic.

Lessons Learned

The colleges have identified several lessons learned through this initiative:

- **Student input is critical.** This helps identify which messaging works for students, which isn't always what the faculty are most comfortable with or assume will work best. This helps ensure that any materials and campaigns will resonate, and helps gain buy-in from students for their involvement. This could be achieved by having a separate committee of students to consult, or adding a small group of students to a faculty committee focused on sexual health.
- **Food and fun giveaways get students' attention.** While it isn't necessary to make a large investment in food and giveaways, they can be helpful in bringing students to campus events. Once students are interested and engaged, it's easier to provide them with educational information and resources.
- **Enlist help. Faculty and staff can't be expected to know everything about sexual health and preventing unplanned pregnancy.** By working with Power to Decide, the Women's Foundation of Mississippi, and other community partners, these four colleges had access to a wealth of information and technical assistance. In addition, forming a committee allowed staff to work together rather than go it alone—by having everyone pitch in a little, it reduced the workload of having this be the job of one single person, and the college was able to make a bigger impact.
- **Students are very open to—and grateful for—receiving this information.** While it's easy to assume that college students are adults and they should come to college with knowledge about sexual health, many of the students interviewed noted that prior to college they hadn't received any kind of formal sex education, so the information they received at Hinds had been invaluable. Many mentioned that they wanted more information.

- **Capitalize on existing events.** It isn't necessary to have a separate event solely dedicated to preventing unplanned pregnancy. There might be opportunities to piggyback on campaigns with related topics, such as AIDS awareness and prevention, alcohol abuse, and many others. This not only helps students connect pregnancy planning to other aspects of their life, but can reduce the cost of hosting separate, dedicated events.
- **Dedicated funding isn't necessary, but it can go a long way.** Many of the solutions that colleges can pursue might not require any additional resources. For example, MGCCC's addition of language to its Health and Wellness statement did not require significant funds. Another example is including interventions like the online lessons in an existing course, or providing links to other online, reputable sources. However, dedicated funding can be helpful, particularly at the start, to convene campus officials to identify which strategies would be the best fit, and to help implement them if necessary.
- **Students do not always know what resources are available to them.** Mississippi has a network of county health departments as well as a state family planning waiver program, but students don't necessarily know that they can take advantage of these services. Having a connection between the college and community resources, and raising awareness about state programs, can be extremely helpful.

Mississippi has been and continues to be a leader in recognizing how important it is to provide college students with important education about how to prevent unplanned pregnancy. Other states, including Arkansas and Louisiana, have replicated similar legislation.

The colleges highlighted in this case study have taken the initiative to implement policies and strategies that will greatly benefit their students, by helping to ensure that they have the knowledge they need to pursue their education and other life goals by helping them decide if, when, and under what circumstances to start their family or have additional children.

This case study was published with generous support from the Women's Foundation of Mississippi.

“EVEN THOUGH SOME PEOPLE ARE CONSIDERED GROWN, THEY STILL DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT SEX EDUCATION. EVEN THOUGH, IN MY OPINION, IT'S BETTER THAT PEOPLE LEARN IT AT A YOUNGER AGE, IF THEY HAVEN'T LEARNED IT, IT'S REALLY NEVER TOO LATE.”

—Male student

Endnotes

- 1 For full Mississippi state data, visit <https://powertodecide.org/what-we-do/information/national-state-data/mississippi>.
- 2 Antonishak, J., & Connolly, C. (2014). Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy and Community Colleges: An Evaluation of Online Lessons 2nd Edition. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
- 3 Hess, C., Krohn S., Reichlin, L., Roman, S., and Gault., B. (2014). Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi's Community Colleges. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.