

# Lexington, university partners advance on community-identified projects

With more than a dozen on-going community-engaged courses and service projects, University of Mississippi faculty, staff, students and community partners are leading a ground-breaking spring semester.

The pilot phase of M Partner will address priority projects centered around community health and well-being, economic development, educational initiatives and beautification. All these projects have potential to create partnerships that lead to transformational collaborations between community members and UM faculty, staff and students.

## Pilot Project

### Seeing Initial Results

“M Partner gives our students and faculty ways to engage in meaningful relationships and partnerships with the communities and citizens of Mississippi,” said Noel E. Wilkin, provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs. “These collaborations and experiences make the work we do relevant to the state and have a transformative effect on our faculty and students, while striving to improve the quality of life for those in the communities.”

M Partner was designed using a national model, the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network. The initiative aligns university talent with community-driven projects

to create tangible results in partner communities.

The university and the partner communities have committed to a pilot phase of 18 to 24 months in Charleston, Lexington and New Albany.

“With M Partner, we seek to create tangible benefits in our partner communities,” said Katrina Caldwell, vice chancellor for diversity and community engagement.”

The involvement of our community partners is essential for the success of this collaboration, and we are grateful to the community leaders and organizations that have invited us into their work.”

### Capitalizing on Community Strengths

After its launch in March 2018, M Partner convened stakeholder meetings with community leaders in Charleston, Lexington and New Albany to identify each community’s strengths, opportunities and aspirations.

“In the needs assessment phase of M Partner, we spoke with many individuals who are working tirelessly to create pathways to opportunity and economic mobility,” said Albert Nylander, professor of sociology and director of the university’s McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement. “Across all partner communities, we heard a deep desire for economic growth and an aspiration for

the younger generation to be part of a movement toward innovation and economic revitalization.”

These community meetings produced a list of 27 priority projects and structured how the university as a whole can advance community and economic development in these three rural Mississippi communities.

“In the first year of M Partner implementation, we sought to generate momentum by aligning with other initiatives housed at the McLean Institute,” said Laura Martin, M Partner director and associate director of the McLean Institute.

“Through the efforts of summer associates with the North Mississippi VISTA Project and students in the Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development initiative, M Partner offered summer learning and enrichment opportunities for nearly 400 youth in Charleston, Lexington and New Albany.”

In August and October, M Partner hosted business forum webinars in each community with support from the Entrepreneur Center at the Mississippi Development Authority; these events engaged 115 participants from UM and partner communities. These events highlighted seven locally owned businesses and one nonprofit organization while providing networking opportunities among Ole Miss students, faculty, staff and community

partners.

### Days of Service Propel Next Phase of M Partner

M Partner also has created opportunities for students to participate in Days of Service in partner communities.

“The success of these Days of Service is due to our incredible campus and community volunteers – nearly 200 of them,” said Michaela Cooper, an M Partner VISTA who has worked to organize days of service in each partner community. “M Partner Days of Service have provided students the opportunity to carry community service beyond campus to appreciate the opportunities for economic growth in Charleston, Lexington and New Albany.

“Since our Community Day in October, I have received many inquiries from students about future opportunities to be involved with M Partner. This engagement has helped to build trust and excitement that are propelling us into the next phase of M Partner.”

### More Priority Community Projects Underway in Lexington

During the spring 2019 semester, faculty and staff have taken on 15 of the community-identified projects. These priority projects will address community interests such as social media campaigns, health fairs, addressing the opioid epidemic, grant writing, research around the third-grade reading gate, expanding local farmers mar-

kets, and analysis of parks and recreation infrastructure.

In Lexington, Ole Miss representatives are tackling projects that address community health and literacy goals. “We are grateful to the University of Mississippi and M Partner for their resources in helping make a difference in the lives of our children and their futures,” said Robin McCrory, mayor of Lexington. “Having more people at the table through this partnership brings a new, positive perspective and outlook to the people of our community as we work together to accomplish these most worthwhile goals.”

For the M Partner projects in Lexington, the Department of Health, Exercise Science and Recreation Management and the Office of Health Promotion will be joining community efforts to establish a health fair for Lexington’s Spring Festival and completing the 2019 Healthy Hometown application. The Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction is working with the school district to promote reading proficiency by the third grade.

“To ensure that all students read and write at proficient levels, we know that effective literacy instruction is critical,” said Angela Rutherford, professor of teacher education and director of CELI. “The CELI is partnering with the Holmes County Consolidated School District within M Partner to develop a coherent and cohesive literacy framework that teachers and administrators will use to provide instruction across all grade levels.

“When students are proficient readers and writers, they are poised for college and career success, which helps to lift individuals out of poverty.”

The M Partner pilot phase lasts until June 2020. For the duration of the pilot phase, M Partner will continue to establish and deepen collaborations with community partners to advance the shared goal of co-creating knowledge and resources to promote community well-being.

In reflecting on the progress of the initiative since its official launch in March 2018, Caldwell noted that, “Laura Martin, who serves as M Partner director and associate director of the McLean Institute, has worked hard alongside others at the McLean Institute to ensure that this initiative has enjoyed the progress and success that it has to this point.

“This team’s belief in the tenets of mutually beneficial community engagement practices serve as a model for the work that I would like to see grow in our division.” For more information about the M Partner program, visit <http://mpartner.olemiss.edu>.

## Creature of Habit

I don’t like to think that I am “set in my ways” but from all accounts, I am. I am so predictable. Every morning I get out of bed on the left side, go to bathroom and wash my face, speak to Bella, and then straight to my kitchen. I turn on the oven, make the coffee, get my first cup from my Keurig and finish breakfast. I could almost do these things with my eyes closed.



**Peggy’s Take**

I always remember my grandmother used to say, “We are such creatures of habit hardly anything changes from our day to day routines.” If you will just stop and think, this is true.

If you work outside the house, you go to work at the same time, you wear the same type of clothes, you do the same sequence or actions regularly followed with your job task. You go

to lunch at the same time, and usually have the same meal you enjoy everyday. Sometimes I just wonder if my life might be more invigorating if I changed it up some. We all need a change from time to time.

I have been working outside getting my porches, patio, summer house and swimming pool ready for enjoying the fast approaching season. I placed each flower pot, exactly

where it has set for the past several years. My yard art is standing where it has been stuck in the ground for many summers. I have made a list of flowers I plan to plant in each pot, the same flowers. As I stood back and surveyed my work, I thought to myself, “You are so you!” Where is the spontaneity? The sense of adventure? I

grow the same flowers my mother and grandmother had flowering in their old pots years ago. So I immediately began moving pots, yard art, chairs and tables, pillows and everything that was not too heavy to change places and positions of different things in my yard. It looked so different and mixed up and out of place but I wanted a change, so...

Now, the next morning, 8:30 in the cool of the morning, 45 degrees and I am outside moving everything back just the way it was before I had my spur of the moment idea to make a change. Each flower pot is back in it’s own place, yard art is back to it’s old holes in the ground and now I am content once again.

When I get another spurt of energy and the yearn to make a change, I think I will roll over to the right side of the bed and rise for the day. I will not wash my face but just leave the “sleepy” in my eyes. I won’t turn on the oven or make the coffee. Instead I will set a bowl of Special K in my husband’s eating place and give him a

glass of water instead of the fluffy hot home made biscuits, sausage and hot strong coffee. I might even go outside and drag everything askew once again. But, it’s probably going to be quite a long time before the notion hits me full force again.

Let’s change up the menu. Here’s a recipe I have never used. Let’s try it!!

### Ground Beef and Cabbage

- 1 large head of cabbage, chopped
- 1 - 14 ounce can of tomatoes with juice,
- 1 onion chopped,
- salt and pepper,
- 1 tablespoon Italian seasoning,
- 1 pound of ground round or ground beef.

Combine cabbage and tomatoes with juice, onion, Italian seasoning, salt and pepper in a large pot over low heat. Bring cabbage mixture to a simmer and crumble in meat. Cover and cook until cabbage is tender. About 45 minutes.

\* Peggy Sims is a lifelong resident of Attala County and columnist.

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