

Section Seven Successes and Challenges

"I still remember when I moved to Hibbing from Colombia... no English at all. Enrolled in college right away, but I didn't realize how hard would it be. Thanks to [Teacher] and [Teacher] the college experience for a Colombian student in Hibbing Minnesota got way easier and exciting! Thanks for all you guys did."

~English Language Learner

7.1 Story of Student Success

AEOA ABE has served well over 50,000 students since our inception. The Department's mission is *"to enhance the employability and skills of individuals so that they may achieve their life goals"*. Each student has brought with them a legion of life experiences and barriers. To sit with an Adult Education student and truly hear her or his story is much like going to the mountain top to learn from the wise counselor. Each day AEOA's ABE Instructors attempt to impart skills and abilities to each of the students that sit before them, but quite often it is the students who teach us what it is to truly meet your life goals.

Given the gamut of services our program provides and the unique communities we serve, we felt it important to share multiple success stories.

GED Instruction

Student A came started GED classes in October of 2017. He is 30 years old, has a full-time job, a wife and two kids both under the age of 4. While he feels they get by financially, he would like to expand his career opportunities by obtaining his GED and attending college. Although Student A has not yet passed his GED, he has passed 3 of the 4 tests, all while working and taking care of his family, including working over 100 hours in clock time a week. His employer generally allows him to come into class once or twice a week, as his schedule allows, and he works on his studies independently at home both with hard copies and through the distance learning program. He has also taken digital literacy courses for Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel, both to improve his current employment skills and future college and career skills. Student A embodies the drive and determination of so many of AEOA ABE's students, never giving up their quest for a brighter future.

College Preparation

Student B is gearing up to enroll at Lake Superior College. As a single mom raising three boys, ages one-and-one-half, five and eight, she is busy managing their schedules for school, childcare, and doctor appointments, working part-time, attending ABE class, doing her homework and getting her MFIP paperwork in on time. She had always enjoyed school but dropped out in tenth grade. She earned her GED a few years later and worked in food service for several years as a hostess, server and banquet captain. In 2007 she dropped out of the workforce to care for her grandmother and raise her family.

This past fall, she realized she needed to improve her academic skills so she could go on to college and get a better-paying job to support her boys. She has been studying math using Plato online courses both in and out of class to prepare for the Accuplacer math test. In three months, her TABE math score jumped three grade levels.

Because she did not have a computer at home, she started going to the library to do her Plato homework and got interested in volunteering there. The volunteering led her to apply for a library aide position, and she got the job! She enjoys the atmosphere and meeting people. She recently ran into her Montessori Kindergarten teacher from 30 years ago at the checkout desk and had a chance to hear stories about herself as a young learner. Her past food service jobs, like her new library position, required good customer service skills. She said that although she made more money in the hospitality industry, her new schedule works better for her and she feels she gets more respect as a library aide.

“There is always something new to learn – new procedures, new processes – and way too many new books,” she said. She’s even checked out a battery-operated Playaway read-

along library book with a graphic novel for her eight-year old. He loves using it on his own in the evenings and is now enthusiastic about reading aloud instead of being afraid to, she said.

Student B has been using AEOA's Arrowhead Transit bus for her transportation, but for the times when it is not available or she can't get another ride, she walks. She has been spotted logging many a mile, making her way around town in all kinds of weather, pushing the stroller, hauling gear, books and water bottles, while keeping a close eye on her two older children, who are already experienced pedestrians. When her energy lags, she reminds herself that when her grandma lived in Japan, she carried her baby five miles each way over the mountain to get to the market. Student B has inherited that same determination to succeed no matter what the obstacles, so bring on the Pythagorean Theorem!

Dislocated Worker

Student C enrolled in the AEOA ABE after the closure of Jarden, a manufacturing company she worked at for over thirty years. At 67 years old, she knew that she would need to enhance her basic skills before securing new employment and achieving self-sufficiency. She heard about AEOA's program from a fellow co-worker who was attending basic computer classes. Student C set computer skills as her first educational goal. She worked very hard to learn the proficiencies needed for a twenty-first century job, practicing at home as well as in the classroom.

Following completion of the NorthStar Digital Literacy training she received her certificate and was very proud of herself. Having completed her first goal, she set a new one of increasing her math skills. Student C was highly motivated and worked numerous hours in the classroom and by herself to reach her goal.

Given the success she achieved with her first two goals, she decided to take the Accuplacer test at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College. Her scores were amazing, and she is now enrolled in the two-year Human Service Program, receiving a 4.0 for her first semester. Student C appreciated the AEOA ABE program so much that she chose to perform her college service learning project in our classroom assisting the instructor in helping other students achieve their goals.

7.2 Most Pressing Challenges

Much like any organization AEOA faces organizational and programmatic challenges to delivering services.

As a Community Action Agency, we continue to see threats of budget cuts in our Federal and State funding overall. With recent changes in Washington D.C. the philosophical beliefs around education and workforce programming has shifted. Executive Orders implementing work requirements and “streamlining” programming affect how dollars are allocated at a local level and change staffing and resource abilities of AEOA. For instance, our agency’s core funding, Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) has been targeted for elimination as has Energy Assistance and Weatherization, Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), several of our housing program funding streams, and Older America’s funding. Other resources such as SNAP and homeless programs are facing the possibility of crippling

fund reductions. AEOA ABE has been very successful in braiding multiple funding streams to provide a wide variety of programming; as each of these funding streams dwindles, so will the ability to provide dynamic services responsive to community needs. AEOA and ABE teachers encourage clients to register and vote, and voting is one of the personal goals included in SID. Without being partisan, it is important for AEOA to provide information to clients and students how policies at the federal and state level impact opportunities for help from our programs.

Additionally, AEOA is a private non-profit and our staff salaries reflect it. Three years ago, the Agency performed a compensation study to determine a new salary schedule to better align with the market. However, the study only reviewed community action and human service agencies and did not include school districts or other educational entities. While wages did increase based on the results, ABE Instructor wages are still well below our school district counterparts. The salary level combined with a high deductible healthcare plan makes recruiting new instructors very difficult. Luckily, the retirement boom has slowed down a bit and we are retaining our mid-career instructors due to their passion for our students.

Instructors and staff in the Employment and Training Department attempted to unionize and join AFSCME Council 65 in 2015 due to these and other concerns; the effort failed by a narrow margin and no further action has been taken after the cooling-off period required by federal law.

Programmatic challenges are of a different nature, mainly due to the geographic size and rural nature of the program. As mentioned in Section Six, implementation of the new

Student Information Database has shifted our data management process from a centralized location to instructor-based. The amount of professional development needed to assist staff in understanding all the components and ensure data integrity has been monumental. During this transition period, both paper and online records of attendance, activities and assessments are being maintained, and some records can only be saved in paper files. We have seen a drastic shift in our outcome reporting and the amount of time needed by instructors to perform intake and records management. While we understand that a change in operations overall is needed to improve outcomes, ABE program management also believes some of the drop in successful outcomes is due to human error in reporting. As instructors become more familiar with SID and the advantages of immediate online access to their student data, the amount of detail recorded online should increase, improving the accuracy of reports.

As mentioned in Section Three, AEOA ABE is training staff in CCRS, ACES, and the like. The large amount of professional development needed to keep instructors abreast of the latest in curriculum and instruction can be overwhelming for staff who are “doing it all” in our remote classrooms. In addition, our professional development costs can become burdensome to the program given the need to travel for training which reduces student contact hours. For example, the International Falls classroom is 291 miles from the MDE offices in St. Paul. With an average travel speed of sixty-miles per hour, that is just under five hours one way, and AEOA cannot ask the instructor to travel down and back in one day, necessitating a hotel stay and two days away from the classroom setting to participate in opportunities offered in the Twin Cities area.

7.3 Recent Innovations

As mentioned in in Section Six, AEOA ABE is piloting telepresence instruction. This innovative approach to providing instruction in remote areas of Northeast Minnesota has the potential to grow enormously. The instructor is housed at Itasca Community College in Grand Rapids and provides instruction via GoToMeeting or other telepresence software. Students can utilize their own home devices or go to a local library or community center for access to internet and computers. This method of instruction allows students who could not otherwise attend class on-land to attend on-line. These courses are for students who need an instructor's guidance and reassurance and would not thrive in an asynchronous distance learning platform. The pilot is very new and data is not yet available to share on its success or challenges.

This pilot comes from experience in training staff via GoToMeeting and telepresence software. With the geographic challenges mentioned earlier, AEOA ABE was forced to develop unique methods for providing guidance and training to staff. The program began by providing weekly training webinars which were recorded for future reference. Sometimes longer meetings were held with our most remote staff attending online and through conference calls, again, with the meeting being recorded for staff to access later. Having these recordings has also benefited new staff who can review policies and procedures as part of their orientation process.

AEOA also continues to work toward equity for female students and those that identify as people of color. We have several projects around moving women and girls into non-traditional employment and assisting Native Americans and people of color in gaining

employment. In 2012, AEOA was awarded planning funding from the Women's Foundation of Minnesota to engage the Lake County community on women in the trades. AEOA held focus groups with girls and women to understand barriers to entering non-traditional careers. From those findings, AEOA partnered with the Lake Superior School District to help plan their first ever girls-only industrial tech classes that have been very successful in enrolling more girls into trades courses. Women were also successfully recruited for Mesabi Range College welding and millwright programs offered in Two Harbors and Silver Bay. The program is currently in a partnership with Hibbing Community College to provide learning community type support for women entering several of their trades programs. We also had multi-year funding from the State and the Women's Foundation to engage women in non-traditional entrepreneurship and to host pre-apprenticeship classes for those interested in going into the carpentry field.

AEOA ABE was integral in the recent Youth at Work Equity project from MN DEED to serve Native American youth in partnership with the Bois Forte Tribal Government. This project was a construction career pathway for youth enrolled in the Bois Forte Band or living in the reservation communities. The ABE program provided the contextualized classroom instruction in construction math, reading, and workplace skills. This was a summer program with roughly 100 hours of ABE instruction for 22 youth. The students rehabbed seven tribally-owned homes to reduce the waiting list for housing on the reservation.

And finally, AEOA ABE is one of seven programs at AEOA receiving SNAP 50/50 reimbursement for employment services provided to students and has provided services

under the agency's SNAP Outreach grant for roughly three years. By adding the Bridge to Benefits eligibility tool to our intake process we have not only connected students with a valuable resource to support their learning, but have found a way to offset the cost of intake hours.

The SNAP 50/50 project is a little more elaborate for the Agency. We were one of the first rural community-based organizations to be granted SNAP 50/50 reimbursement. AEOA's SNAP 50/50 is a unique project for the state as we have embedded the work in several programs not traditionally viewed as employment based (i.e. Rural Rides and homeless prevention and intervention) utilizing relationships already built with ABE Instructors, Homeless or Youth Case Managers, Employment Counselors, and Transportation Advocates to engage them in accessing employment services. This method makes employment programming less daunting for someone already trying to meet the eligibility requirements of multiple programs. The program works seamlessly to engage voluntary SNAP participants throughout our service area. In addition, AEOA has received reimbursement approval for educational activities provided by ABE staff. These include basic/foundational skills instruction; career/technical education; English language acquisition; bridge programming; and work readiness training.

7.4 Equity in Programming

Currently, AEOA Senior Leadership is 100% white and the AEOA Board is 92% white. Agency staff are 96% white and while this resembles the overall demographics of the geographic area we serve; it does not parallel the demographics of the clientele within our programs. Most of our programs serve 17-30% people of color and, as mentioned earlier,

twenty-nine percent (29%) of the 1,100 students served by ABE in the last program year were part of this demographic. AEOA realizes that the agency has work to do to better culturally represent the region in its leadership ranks and Board composition. A commitment of our Executive Director is to focus on increasing the Agency's cultural competency by affirmatively recruiting people of color to the Agency Board and staff.

In addition, AEOA strictly adheres to Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employment guidelines and policies and regularly reviews our progress in this area at Department Director team meetings. The Agency maintains a Title VI policy in accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1987, and all related statutes. AEOA holds both a Certificate of Compliance and a Certificate of Equal Pay from the Minnesota Department of Human Rights.

Recruitment efforts for employees are region-wide and target American Indian Reservations including Bois Forte, Grand Portage, and Leech Lake. Annual performance appraisals of staff include evaluation of client interaction skills, customer service, and outreach techniques. Initial staff orientation and training include an understanding of the Agency's mission statement and the Affirmative Action policy and its implications.

AEOA listens to the people it serves. As a community action agency, we complete a community needs assessment every third year to best determine the specific needs of people in poverty. Our last tri-annual assessment interviewed nearly 300 households to discuss needs in the areas of employment, health and quality of life, housing and issues related to children and seniors. That information is then analyzed on various levels including

cultural demographics. The information gathered is used to develop programs and strategic directions for the Agency.

AEOA attempts to be as inclusive of diverse populations as program guidelines allow. For instance, instructors ask clients the pronoun by which they prefer to be identified even though the ABE reporting system does not currently allow for variations on gender identify to be captured in a check box. With their permission, however, this information can be included as a private log item in their individual SID record.

AEOA's youth serving programs have designed a specific curriculum in diversity training and philosophy. Youth service programs enlist a respectful, person-centered approach that has been demonstrated through special need accommodations, utilization of Anti-Bias and Roots and Wings curriculum, and cultural experiential education activities. AEOA ABE instructors are provided the opportunity to attend these trainings to increase skills for serving our younger students.

AEOA has also hosted several programs aimed at addressing the disparity in employment outcomes for African American and Native American individuals in the communities we serve. The first of these was AEOA's Equity Program, through which we partner across St. Louis County working to enhance services provided to African Americans and Native Americans on MFIP to increase the likelihood of achieving successful employment and moving off public assistance. Services were provided in a culturally-relevant manner using culturally-specific staff and events to engage the clients. ABE instructors provided basic and contextualized skills courses to cohorts of students within

this program. While that funding was eliminated, the learning from the project has been embedded throughout our service delivery.

Most recently we ran a Youth at Work Equity project serving Native American youth in partnership with the Boise Forte Tribal Government. We provided a construction career pathway program expanding our YouthBuild program to youth enrolled in the Bois Forte Band or living in the reservation communities. The steering committee had both Tribal Government representatives and youth as members to ensure that the services were provided in a manner appropriate for the target audience. This was an exciting project with excellent outcomes for the Tribal youth which provided our program great connections to the Anishinaabe elders in St. Louis County. The relationships built through this targeted program has enhanced the opportunities to engage in culturally-specific programming for all our students.

AEOA also partners with local Together for Youth groups in several of our communities, engaging clients in support groups and services that allow them to share their feelings and concerns around their sexual orientation or gender identity. Where possible, we engage in community conversations to educate our staff and the greater community around understanding and awareness of issues affecting LGBTQ community members. Due to a recent increase in transgender and LGBTQ identifying clients AEOA is seeking additional training and resources to better assist this population within our programs.

AEOA keeps a record of Title VI and other diversity training provided for reporting to our funders. The chart below outlines a few of the formal trainings delivered across the agency in 2017.

Date of Training	Type of Training	Target Audience
1/6/17	IDI Intercultural Development Inventory	E&T Managers
1/13/2017	IDI Intercultural Development Inventory	Directors
2/23/2017	Preventing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace	Management
2/28/2017	Marnita's Table: Equity and Diversity Training Session	All staff
4/8/2017	PASS Passenger Assistance training	Transit staff
4/22/2017	Customer service training; generational differences	Transit staff
5/18/2017	Civil Rights Training	SNAP Staff (Including ABE Instructors)
6/15/2017	DEED State Equity Gathering	Grant participants
6/22-23/2017	Native American Curriculum for State Licensed Substance Abuse Programs	Youth Services Staff
8/26/2017	PASS Passenger Assistance training	Transit staff
9/11/2017	Energy Assistance yearly training: cultural diversity/ generational differences	Energy Assistance Staff
9/12/2017	We Are All Criminals	Employment Counselors
9/16/2017	Customer service training including generational differences	Transit staff
11/16/2017	MIEA MN Indian Education Association Training	Youth Services Staff
12/12/2017	Bridges out of Poverty	All staff
12/21/2017	Preventing and Handling Workplace Violence/Stress Solutions (this did refer/relate to discriminatory remarks, protected classes, etc).	All staff

AEOA views equity as something a community creates together on an ongoing basis. The Agency mission is to strengthen communities by providing opportunities for those experiencing social and economic challenges. This mission is based on the belief that all people should be treated with respect and given the same opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency. Although we live in a racially homogenous region (92% white), we work with our staff and community partners to have tough conversations about program offerings and the way we do business. We seek input to improve our services for all those we encounter.

Recently our Department and Agency leadership engaged in the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as part of the previously mentioned St. Louis County Equity

Project. The IDI is a cross-culturally valid assessment for building cultural competence in an organization. The definition of culture for the IDI process goes beyond race to gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, religion, and other aspects of our lives that create us as human beings. The Employment and Training Department Managers met monthly for a year to build a shared culture through conversation and personal sharing. Through this process it became very evident that we have more work to do to bring all our staff along on a journey toward equitable service provision. However, due to funding limitations, implementation of CCRS and adult diploma, and staff turnover, our equity work is moving forward in a slower manner than previously planned. The program is embracing the CCRS concept of "productive struggle" - not hesitating to engage with the tough tasks - where determination and being flexible are inherently worthwhile, even if we don't find a perfect answer to our problem.