

STRENGTHENING ADULT CAREER PATHWAYS IN MINNESOTA: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COHORT FOR MANAGERS

Patsy Egan
Elizabeth Andress

ABE Teaching & Learning Advancement System (ATLAS) at Hamline University

ABSTRACT

Establishing adult career pathways is challenging, complex work. In Minnesota, a new professional development initiative provides ABE managers with a facilitated, supported, year-long cohort as they work to create or strengthen a career pathway program in collaboration with WIOA partners in their localities. In this article, the rationale, design, and outcomes of this professional development activity are outlined. Key features include an experiential learning approach, a mix of face-to-face and online interaction and presentation, peer partners, coaching calls, goal-setting, and local action steps.

INTRODUCTION

Driving forces in the field of adult basic education have reshaped our work in profound ways in recent years. While preparing adults for family-sustaining work has always been a tenet of ABE, the creation of seamless career pathways for adults in need of both basic skills and career preparation has taken on new emphasis with the 2014 passing of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128 [29 U.S.C. Sec. 3101, et. seq.]). Establishing strong, sustainable career pathways is complex work that requires a great deal of knowledge and skill, as well as dedicated time and resources on the part of ABE practitioners.

In Minnesota, a new professional development (PD) cohort specifically for managers assists in creating and strengthening adult career pathways (ACPs). This article describes this ACP program development initiative, our approach to design and delivery of the PD, and the initiative's impact to date.

CONTEXT FOR A NEW CAREER PATHWAYS COHORT FOR ABE MANAGERS

Starting in 2007, Minnesota was fortunate to participate in the Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears Initiative, out of which grew the "FastTRAC" model of career pathway work, focused on making systemic changes to help low-skilled adults gain in-demand skills and postsecondary credentials. When the Shifting Gears Initiative ended in 2012, there continued to be a focus on adult career pathway programming in the state, with some funding available through competitive grant programs. With the passage of WIOA in 2014, the call for adult career

pathways programming has increased, and adult basic education programs, along with their partners, are striving to develop ACP options to best meet the needs of low-skilled adults across the state.

Through their ongoing efforts with FastTRAC and other career pathway programming over the past ten years, Minnesota adult basic education programs have encountered a number of common challenges in developing and delivering sustainable career pathways. In response, it became clear to state ABE leadership that comprehensive professional development was needed to equip and support ABE managers as one of the critical partners in developing and sustaining quality ACP programs.

DEVELOPMENT AND DESIGN OF THE ACP COHORT

In Minnesota, professional development for the state's ABE professionals is provided by agencies funded by the Minnesota Department of Education. One agency, ATLAS (ABE Teaching & Learning Advancement System), provides the lion's share of PD for the state. Housed at Hamline University in St. Paul, ATLAS (www.atlasABE.org) has, for ten years, designed and implemented PD initiatives large and small for Minnesota ABE and was recently recognized by the National Coalition for Literacy with a national leadership award. While ATLAS staff has an abundance of expertise in language, literacy, and math instruction, the ACP work required hiring a consultant with direct experience in teaching career-focused classes, writing curricula, participating in ACP partnerships, and facilitating professional development.

The consultant (Elizabeth Andress, co-author of this article) spent a full year gathering information and designing a PD response. Top priority was listening to the field to ensure our PD would be relevant to real needs and contexts. She met with ABE managers and other ABE professionals from across the state, asking them to detail their keys to success as well as their most pressing challenges in ACP work. She took care to meet with managers from a variety of contexts for ABE: urban, rural, suburban, as well as mid-sized cities, programs with leveled classes and those who serve students in drop-in settings, etc. It soon became clear that a PD response to strengthen ACPs in Minnesota could not be a series of content-heavy workshops, nor could it be a one-size-fits-all approach. A multifaceted, differentiated, and highly supported PD design was required to meet the needs of our many and varied ABE contexts.

As the year-long development work progressed, the ACP consultant met regularly with an ACP leadership team to help shape this initiative. This team includes the ATLAS Director (Patsy Egan, co-author of this article) and three members of the state ABE staff: the transition specialist, the professional development specialist, and the state ABE director. While adult career pathways PD work could stretch in many directions and could continue for multiple years, four key areas of ACP best practice were chosen to focus our efforts, based on top priorities identified in the field. These foci were formulated into training objectives for the first-year ACP cohort participants.

Upon completion of the one-year PD cohort, participating ABE administrators will be able to:

1. Define and describe adult career pathways (ACPs) and integrated education and training (IET) as outlined in WIOA and as interpreted by MN Dept. of Education and identify/modify/create courses and pathways that meet federal and state requirements.
2. Expand and strengthen connections for ACP programming with various local workforce entities.
3. Build relationships with employers within the target career pathway sector and engage them in various aspects of the program.
4. Identify and address possible barriers to full enrollment in ACP programs and build strong referral/recruitment streams to build strong enrollments.

The decision was made to narrow the focus in this way to promote solid capacity-building in these areas, rather than attempting to address every aspect of ACP programming and run the risk of building lasting skills in none of them. (We have tentatively identified five new areas of focus to be addressed in a second phase of the PD cohort.)

As this PD cohort initiative took shape, we drew extensively from other professional learning experiences created for ABE professionals throughout the state (see www.atlasABE.org for more information on PD for transitions, STAR, CCRS, numeracy, and other areas of ABE practice). As always, our PD work was grounded in evidence-based PD practices (Desimone, 2009).

The design for the cohort landed on the following key components: a mix of face-to-face and online presentation and interaction, “in the trenches” assignments to complete in each participant’s locality, regular peer partner feedback and support, occasional check-in calls, and ongoing evaluation throughout the initiative (Guskey, 2002). Table 1 details the PD design. The cohort was promoted to all ABE administrators across the state in an effort to build overall capacity and was not connected to receipt of any particular grant funding.

Innovative Design Approach

A primary challenge in designing professional development to improve adult career pathway programming in Minnesota is the diversity of ABE program contexts, experience, and capacity. One participant in our first-year cohort had 24 years of ABE experience; another was brand new to the field. One had three well-established adult career pathway programs and strong collaborations in place; another had no ACP programs and no collaborating partner relationships. Several participants manage metro-area programs and others are in medium-sized towns; two operate within the Department of Corrections; and one serves ABE learners who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, and deaf disabled across the state. Throughout our

development year, the field’s advice was loud and clear: *Do not inundate us with best practices that do not fit the realities in our setting. Do not tout model programs that would never be replicable in our locality.* Creative approaches were required to equip ABE program managers with essential knowledge, skills, and tools from the field and promote best practices, all while also supporting them to apply these in their own way in their own contexts.

In response, an *experiential learning model* was chosen to ground the design of this professional development. An experiential learning approach to PD, illustrated in Figure 1, ensures that the work is constantly grounded in the concrete experience of participants; includes deliberate individual reflection on that experience; moves to shared conceptualization (what can we conclude?) and a search for other sources for making sense of the experience; then integrates the new understanding into next action steps. This design contrasts with a PD model that relies primarily on conveying best practices from existing expert sources and sends people off to implement on their own, often with residual resistance and minimal success.

A select set of *tools* are provided in the ACP cohort from the vast array of resources available, rather than pointing participants to all available materials. For example, we encourage use of the complete Career Pathways Toolkit, but for training and implementation purposes, we culled a few select guidelines and tools from this 300+ page document that were deemed immediately useful and relevant.

To *contextualize* the application of knowledge from the training, assignments are completed within each cohort participant’s setting. The three primary assignments focus on (a) establishing/strengthening workforce partnerships; (b) building strong enrollments; and (c) engaging employers. Each assignment includes guidelines for best practice, a tool for assessing current practice and identifying opportunities for growth, a process for setting a “SMART” goal, time to carry out action steps, and reflection on results. (SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based.)

Building Strong Enrollments: Examples of SMART Goals

- The community college admissions staff will understand our ACP program offerings and have a process in place for referring incoming students to the Manufacturing and Healthcare ACP programs. This will result in a minimum of 10 participants in each bridge course in the summer of 2018.
- I will develop a brochure that clearly outlines our ParaProfessional course (outline, career ladder, potential earnings, etc.). This brochure will be distributed through outreach efforts in at least three deaf and hard-of-hearing high school and transition programs.

Support and accountability are key to the experiential learning, SMART-goal based approach to PD outlined in this article. As most of the cohort work was carried out locally, connecting

with colleagues within the cohort played a vital role. To this end, at the initial workshop participants chose peer partners to work with throughout the cohort year. These partners provided feedback on each other's draft SMART goals and action steps, participated together in periodic check-in calls with the PD facilitators, and shared information and insights with one another. Partners and facilitators served to both support and hold participants accountable during the year's ACP work.

Evaluation was deliberate and ongoing throughout the pilot year of this ACP PD cohort. Participants reflected on successes and challenges in meeting their SMART goals. They also provided feedback on required evaluation surveys after each PD activity. A significant part of the spring wrap-up webinar was dedicated to evaluation of impact and on the methodology and quality of the PD cohort.

Impact of ACP Program Development Cohort

The pilot year of the cohort concluded in May 2018. In the final evaluation, participants reported significant knowledge and skill development gained from the PD cohort, summarized in Table 2.

Specific progress made at the local level varied widely among cohort participants. Here are a few examples as reported in the final evaluation:

“We have identified the strongest areas of job growth and wages in our area and have created career pathway classes that are aligned to prepare participants to succeed in these jobs. We are building the pathways from prep to specific training classes for entry-level and higher level positions in the health care sector, providing multiple entry/exit options and constant expansion of skills and knowledge.” (Alison Wilcox, Career Pathways Coordinator, Metro South ABE)

“As ABE and Workforce continued our partnership, we made great progress this year in redefining our roles in our bridge programs, including utilizing others' areas of strength to divide tasks.” (Ron Fleischmann, FastTRAC Program Supervisor, Mankato Area ABE)

“I have built relationships with multiple employers to better prepare the students to be the most equipped applicants after completing the ACP course.” (Tammy Schatz, Program Manager, Moorhead ABE)

Participants reported that the support and accountability of a cohort model, the range of assignments, concrete goal-setting, and the ACP tools provide ABE managers with what they need to move forward with ACP program design or improvement in ways they wouldn't have otherwise.

“The check-in calls provided necessary accountability. It made us take time to reflect on where we were, what was next, what was going well, and provided feedback in the middle of the planning process. We got to hear others' struggles, successes, and experiences during the cohort.” (Ann Trochlil, ABE Manager, Glacial Lakes Consortium)

“The most valuable aspects of the cohort training for me were using tools to evaluate our current ACP programming; setting concrete goals so we accomplished things locally and didn’t just learn passively; and reflection time at the end of the cohort year.” (Karen Wolters, ABE Program Coordinator, Mankato Area ABE)

In addition, a less tangible but significant result of the PD is a sense of connection and solidarity among ABE administrators in the cohort, contributing to greater creativity and persistence in addressing challenges at the local level. Participants’ energy and engagement in the full-day wrap-up workshop bodes well for these relationships to sustain into the future, providing ongoing peer support for the ACP work that lies ahead.

CONCLUSION

Professional development for building effective adult career pathway programs across a wide variety of settings requires a creative and contextualized approach. Peer support among participating ABE administrators seems to be one of the most highly-valued aspects of our model. Reported impacts—in knowledge and skills obtained, progress in development of ACPs in each locality, and confidence in the work—are significant. The commitment to use evaluation data from this pilot year will inform an even better cohort experience in year two. We are pleased to share the approach and what we have learned in our pilot year with the wider ABE community as we all work toward stronger career pathways for adult learners in our communities. ☞

REFERENCES

- ATLAS (2017). Adult Basic Education Teaching & Learning Advancement System, housed at Hamline University, funded by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education using federal and state funding: Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-220), CFDA 84.002A and Minnesota Statute 124D.22. St. Paul, Minnesota. Available: www.atlasABE.org.
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers’ professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181–199.
- Guskey, T. R. (2002). Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development. *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 45.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Visual available: <http://doceo.co.uk/l&t/learning/experience.htm>.
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). (2014). Pub L. No. 113–128, Stat. 1425 2014.
- Workforce GPS (2016). Career Pathways Toolkit. Available: https://careerpathways.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/10/20/10/11/Enhanced_Career_Pathways_Toolkit

TABLE 1: DESIGN OF ACP PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT COHORT

Duration	10 months, August–May
Participants	24 ABE program administrators from across the state, self-selected Several ACP focus career sectors: healthcare, trades and industry, education, business
Staffing	Cohort lead: ATLAS ACP consultant Staff with roles: ABE state PD specialist, transitions specialist, and ATLAS director
Delivery Components	Pre-workshop assignments on ACP basics 7-hour face-to-face intensive workshop—presentations, discussions, skill-building, peer partner relationship-building Three major action-oriented assignments spaced over 8 months, on (a) workforce partnerships, (b) building strong enrollments, and (c) employer engagement Two 1.5-hour webinars on partnering with workforce and employers Two 1-hour check-in calls (peer partners + 2 cohort facilitators) 7-hour face-to-face wrap-up workshop—share accomplishments, reflect on learning, evaluate, plan next steps
Online Platform	Schoology used for Weekly communication with cohort participants Submission of and feedback on assignments Sharing reference materials and tools relevant to ACP work Discussion forums and information sharing among participants
Participants Receive	25 CEUs \$400 stipend to the program, plus mileage and lodging expense reimbursement for workshop attendance

TABLE 2: COHORT FINAL EVALUATION RESULTS—SELF-ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS ON PD OBJECTIVES

I was / am now fully able or quite able to:	Before the Cohort	Upon Completion of the Cohort
list, explain, and implement the seven criteria of a fully-realized adult career pathway (ACP) program.	5%	89%
partner with the local workforce entities in design and delivery of ACP programs.	37%	79%
engage employers in ACP program development and delivery.	10%	52%
build strong enrollments for an ACP program.	10%	63%
continue effective ACP program development work beyond the cohort year.	n/a	94%

FIGURE 1: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL (BASED ON KOLB, 1984. VISUAL AVAILABLE: [HTTP://DOCEO.CO.UK/L&T/LEARNING/EXPERIENCE.HTM](http://doceo.co.uk/L&T/LEARNING/EXPERIENCE.HTM))

