

Public Agency Education and Training Initiatives at the State Level: Minnesota Department of Transportation Experience

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I am here to talk to you about Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT's) SEEDS program, which is a statewide diversity initiative conceived around 1993. "SEEDS" is not an acronym. Its genesis was encouragement from our Commissioner on the issue of recruiting highly qualified, diverse candidates for openings in our agency. He said, "Why don't we grow our own?" The program concept was developed and has been in place since that time.

The program is structured within my office, a separate office from the human resources area in MnDOT. If the program were to be replicated, it could just as well be located in a human resources office or somewhere else within any other organization. For MnDOT, however, it has worked well locating it in the office of which I am the Director, the Office of Workforce Equity and Diversity (OWED). In addition to the SEEDS program, we also handle complaint investigation and response to lawsuits, as well as training and consulting with management on issues relating to employment law and affirmative action. More recently, we hired an American Sign Language interpreter, who works with our deaf employees and their supervisors.

What is SEEDS and what are some of the parameters? It is an outreach program targeted at racial or ethnic minorities, the economically disadvantaged, or both. It offers highly motivated students the chance to learn through on-the-job experience. The students are paid while they work for us, and we prepare them for possible full-time employment after graduation, depending on job availability. They are not guaranteed a job, but many of our graduates have been hired at MnDOT.

The benefits to MnDOT have included access to highly motivated student employees. This has an impact on and reduces our long-term recruitment and advertising costs. We share in the educational process with our partner institutions, and we have a chance to observe and develop potential full-time employees.

We conduct the outreach for this program using some of the standard methods such as mailings and brochures sent to educational institutions and to students themselves. We also partner with other programs, such as the national Transportation and Civil Engineering Careers (TRAC) program developed with support from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and two internal MnDOT programs, our graduate engineer training program and our civil engineer technology training programs. We have also sent printed materials to high schools throughout the state of Minnesota, as well as to placement offices at the postsecondary level. In addition, as part of the outreach program, the SEEDS program manager, Emeric Pratt, has done a tremendous job working with some of our technical schools in the local Minneapolis-St. Paul area, as well as in other areas within the state. We are also involved in collaborative efforts with the Center for Transportation Studies and other organizations at the University of Minnesota.

A wide variety of courses is available to the students, including administrative support, office and clerical activities, landscape architecture, law, surveying, civil engineering, business, communications, and management information systems. This variety provides the department with student workers in many areas.

To be a SEEDS student, you must be a member of a racial or ethnic minority or be economically disadvantaged, or both. The status of being economically disadvantaged is determined on the basis of 125 percent of the poverty income level from data provided by the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. Students must have at least 12 months left in their educational program to be eligible; however, this requirement is somewhat reduced if they are in a program that is less than 2 or 3 years long. The maximum amount of time that a student could remain in our program is 4 years.

With high school seniors, we are looking for students who have career goals that match MnDOT's needs. As for business, technical, or trade school entry, students need an overall grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 or the equivalent. They have to be studying subjects that would be useful to us at MnDOT in terms of our hiring, and they must maintain their GPA at 2.5 or above.

The requirements are the same for college and university students, except that SEEDS engineering students must have a 3.0 average, which is the minimum used for hiring civil engineering students at MnDOT.

We have also had a number of welfare-to-work participants, who have come to us through trade technical schools in the Hennepin and Ramsey Counties Twin Cities Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OICs). These students' achievements have been a source of great pride and satisfaction for them because the wages and the benefits that they receive from MnDOT allow them to care for their families.

The funding for this program comes from the normal budgetary funds set aside for MnDOT operations in terms of total salaries. The additional overhead comes from the administrative costs for the program manager and some rather minimal program costs. The funding has been devised so that 75 percent of each student's cost is paid through my office to each office, district, or division that wants a SEEDS student, and 25 percent has to come from their own office budget. This way there is an incentive not to abuse the program because some of their own dollars are involved. MnDOT would be hiring student workers anyway to do these jobs, so there is no additional program cost for salaries. The SEEDS student workers are paid as student worker clericals, student work paraprofessionals, or paraprofessional seniors; those classifications come from state schedules. These workers can only be part of the SEEDS program as long as they are enrolled as students.

Supervisors have the responsibility for making the SEEDS program work. First, they have to provide the students with a mechanism to be successful, orienting them to the organization and its policies and procedures. The students' job responsibilities must match their academic curriculum; that is, it would not be appropriate to have engineering students perform administrative or

clerical tasks. In addition, the supervisor must make sure that the employee receives appropriate supervision. The supervisor must also work with the SEEDS program manager to assist in permanent job placement as the students approach the end of their academic term.

Each SEEDS student has a mentor, who is different from his or her supervisor. The mentors are called SEEDS planters and have received training as mentors. They are part of a larger mentoring program that MnDOT instituted about 18 months ago throughout the organization.

Currently, we are in a demand industry, and our office fields all requests for SEEDS students. Supervisors prepare position descriptions, interview the students who are referred to them, make the job offers, and ensure that the students get off on the right foot in their career at MnDOT. Supervisors are also required to conduct a formal mini-evaluation with the student at the end of the first 3 months and subsequently every 6 months. If there is a problem, such as poor work habits, that is affecting the student's success, the supervisor must work with the program manager to try to resolve it early so that the student, while working at MnDOT toward his or her career goals, will have a fulfilling experience.

The success of the SEEDS program has been due in part to the inner workings of three groups: (a) the students putting forth their best efforts, (b) the educators and placement counselors working with our office, and (c) MnDOT management, both the immediate supervisor and upper-level management who provide guidance to our office on how to develop this program.

Data on the program from July 1997 showed a variety of racial and ethnic groups and included both men and women. Most of our SEEDS students are young, just coming out of high school or college; however, we also have other, nontraditional students. Our oldest SEEDS student was 45; both he and his son were enrolled in the program at the same time. SEEDS students are working in virtually every division and office in our agency. From June 1994, when we really got the program off the ground, to date, there have been 41 hires, including both men and women with various racial and ethnic backgrounds. The hires were distributed among the clerical, professional, and technical areas. SEEDS graduates have been hired as everything from clerk typists II to civil engineers. They are working in our engineering services area, our right-of-way and surveys technical support, and in bridges and structures. They are working in some of our districts up north in Detroit Lakes and in Bemidji, Minnesota. They are working in information resource management, administration and human resources, and in the audit area.

Some graduates have been hired outside of MnDOT. Employers have included consulting firms, other private

industry, and publications, most within Minnesota. Some graduates have been hired outside the state of Minnesota. We certainly do not consider it a failure if the students do not ultimately come to work at MnDOT; however, the majority of the SEEDS students do. We believe that we are providing a benefit in terms of giving people who are in their student years a successful and positive initial work experience so that they will take what they have learned and the skills they have acquired into whatever endeavor they undertake in the future.

SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE WITH AUDIENCE

Question

With respect to the welfare-to-work initiative, one of the challenges we find is that once the job is obtained, infrastructure is missing, such as transportation, child care, health care. I presume that health care is not an issue because these individuals are state employees; however, what do you provide with respect to transportation and child care?

Response

Some of these issues are addressed when the person is working for us as a student; there may be child care and transportation issues even then. It is something they work through with support from the people who are working with them to enter the program as well as from the academic counselors in their school and the SEEDS program manager. We have not found these to be major issues when they are hired as full-time workers by MnDOT because they have been addressed earlier. It is a collaborative effort. The welfare-to-work entrants have the program manager to go to, their supervisor, and their MnDOT mentor as well as the other support people they might have through other mechanisms to help in that transition. Although these are real problems, so far they have not been viewed as impenetrable barriers.

Question

Do other state departments of transportation (DOTs) have similar programs?

Response

Part of the reason we are here is to spread the information about our program because we think it is replicable.

We are not aware of any other DOTs that do things in this way; however, we want other DOTs to know about the program. If there is any aspect of our program that other states think they could replicate, that would be very gratifying.

Question

You mentioned the number of students hired and success stories. On the flip side, has there been any experience with students who have started this program but have not been successful for whatever reason? If so, what was learned from those learning experiences? What was it that really just did not click?

Response

There have been relatively few students who have left the program because of work-related problems. A few could not adjust to the world of work, could not grasp the notion of positive work habits, such as being on time, having respect for coworkers, and that sort of thing; no more than three or four fall into this category. We have had students who, for one reason or another, had to interrupt their education. That reason might have been a family crisis—anything from a death in the family to major surgery. In these cases, if it seems appropriate, we will put them on a deferred track, so that when they can get their life back together, overcome whatever the impediment, we will bring them back. If they have shown themselves to be dedicated student workers, we do try to maintain that status and work through whatever problems might arise.

Question

What was the genesis of this program?

Response

It was started as a diversity initiative. Our Commissioner wondered why MnDOT was going outside of the state to recruit black civil engineers. At that time, in 1992, there were no native-born minority students at the University of Minnesota in the civil engineering program. The Commissioner believed that to be an unsatisfactory situation. Hence, the program began as a means of addressing a civil engineering issue and has grown beyond that. Diversity issues are supported within my agency very strongly, both in policy and in funding, and this seemed to be a marriage of both re-

sulting in a program that would meet these needs simultaneously. However, the commitment of the top-level management to making it happen and then assembling a committed team to work on the project is essential for success.

Question

I have a suggestion for you. It seems as though this program, and some information about this program, should perhaps be disseminated to the greater body of DOTs.

Response

That is a good suggestion, and in fact there will be a session at the TRB Annual Meeting to discuss the results of this conference, and a Conference Proceedings will be published in which this could be a representative case study of what a state DOT is doing. This would be a good presentation to disseminate more widely to other

states. MnDOT really wants to share our successes and learn from others.

Question

How do you measure the effectiveness of the program?

Response

We do track all the numbers. Probably the most important criterion is whether this program is serving MnDOT's needs to have a diverse, highly qualified pool of persons for job placement in MnDOT. That is probably our most important measurement, but we are also looking at the number of students who graduate and work elsewhere and have success there. Last year, our SEEDS graduates were approximately 10 percent of the permanent full-time hires in MnDOT. We hired about 150 people permanently full time, and about 15 of those were SEED students; thus, the program has had a significant impact.