

THE SEEDS STUDENT WORKER PROGRAM

A Success Story

LINDA K. DAHLEN

“Why can't we grow our own?” That was the question posed by Jim Denn, Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation, several years ago, when he was informed that a majority of the racial/ethnic minority students studying civil engineering at the University of Minnesota were foreign students who would not remain in the United States. Denn, whose administration has been notable for its emphasis on diversity, was concerned that Mn/DOT was missing out on the opportunity to utilize all available skills and talents needed to make the agency competitive in the 21st century.

“Seeds”—a concept, not an acronym—is the practical answer to Denn's rhetorical question. The goal of the program is to provide highly qualified, diverse candidates for employment within Mn/DOT. Responsibility for the development and management of the Seeds Student Worker Program was placed in the Mn/DOT Office of Workforce Equity and Diversity. Since the program's inception in 1994, Mn/DOT has hired 44 Seeds graduates as full-time employees. Their positions range from clerk typist to communications specialist to civil engineer.

Requirements for Participation

The Seeds Program is open to full-time students who meet all of the following criteria: are preparing for careers in occupations relevant to Mn/DOT, meet required academic qualifications, and are either members of racial/ethnic minority groups or economically disadvantaged. The Seeds program manager refers applicants to supervisors within Mn/DOT, who make the decision to hire. After being appointed to a position within Mn/DOT that corresponds to their areas of study, Seeds students must meet the performance expectations of the job and maintain academic qualifications in order to

continue in the program. The students work part-time while attending classes. Students who attend a college or university work full-time during summer and winter breaks.

Financing

To be institutionalized, the Seeds Program needed adequate funding. Mn/DOT committed to funding a program coordinator position and to developing a funding process for student worker salaries. The program participants are appointed as student workers under the appropriate collective bargaining agreement. Current hourly wages range from \$9.73 to \$12.89.

The salaries of the students are funded 75 percent from a special centralized fund in Mn/DOT's Finance and Administration Division and 25 percent by the office/division/district in which the student is employed. Under this formula, the office/division/district makes a commitment to managing the student wisely, since 25 percent of his or her salary is from the local budget. On the other hand, the 75 percent funding from a central source provides an incentive for local units to try a Seeds student worker.

It is noteworthy that, besides funding for the program coordinator, the program adds no significant overall departmental costs, since student workers would be hired to do the necessary work anyway. Mn/DOT continues to hire non-Seeds student workers when a program participant is not available. Non-Seeds students, however, may not be studying areas that match their work responsibilities, and they are not required to meet or maintain academic qualifications.

Seeds Student Workers

Seeds student workers are studying in areas ranging from administrative support to business to electri-

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Name: Aurora Walls
Graduated from: University of Minnesota
Major: Scientific and Technical Communication
Date Hired at Mn/DOT: July 1997, Technical Writer, Office of Finance and Administration
Benefit from the Seeds Program: "My experience in Seeds gave me a look at what's really out there and going on in the business world."

Personal Comments: "I am a single mother of two and felt that a college degree would benefit my overall lifestyle, and that of my children as well."



Name: Carl Dagen
Graduated from: University of Minnesota
Major: Civil Engineering
Date Hired at Mn/DOT: July 8, 1998, Graduate Engineer Rotation Program Trainee
Benefit from the Seeds Program: "I gained valuable work experience for civil engineering."
Personal Comments: "I enjoy new and challenging experiences. Life can be everything

or nothing at all. I strive to make the most of it."



Name: Diane Clark
Graduated from: East Metro Opportunities Industrialization Center
Date Hired at Mn/DOT: August 1996, Clerk Typist I, Land Management Office, Valuation Unit. Promoted May 1997 to Clerk Typist II.
Benefit from the Seeds Program: "I had the opportunity to work for Land Management full-time."

Personal Comments: "Before coming to work in the Seeds Program, I had very low self-esteem. I was on Aid to Families with Dependent Children and didn't see much hope, but now I'm full-time, and I love what I do. I feel good about myself, and for once in my life I can truly say I'm happy."

cal engineering. Currently, approximately 70 percent of the students are members of a racial/ethnic minority group, and 39 percent are female; 9 percent are welfare-to-work participants.

The Seeds Program has received widespread support throughout Mn/DOT. Some students have done so well in their capacity as student workers that they have been hired as regular employees even before finishing their schooling, continuing their education part-time at night or on weekends.

Problems Addressed

The Seeds Program has helped Mn/DOT achieve greater racial/ethnic and gender diversity in its workforce. Approximately 23 percent of the minorities working in Mn/DOT are either current or former Seeds student workers.

Traditional affirmative action measures are increasingly viewed negatively by some segments of society. There is currently considerable controversy regarding programs that include such preferences. Program guidelines have been specifically designed to include nonminorities and males. As a result, the program has a high level of acceptance. Mn/DOT believes the program as implemented is in accord with current legal guidelines regarding employment in government.

All states are currently working on ways to increase the number of persons transitioning from welfare to employment. Those leaving welfare face the same difficulties as all new hires, and additional problems as well. The supportive network provided to Seeds student workers helps make this transition easier so the former welfare recipients are more likely to achieve economic stability for themselves and their families.

Seeds Planters

In addition to the support of the Seeds program coordinator and their supervisor, students benefit from the assistance of a mentor, called a "Seeds Planter." These Mn/DOT volunteers assist the Seeds participants by providing support, sharing knowledge of the culture of the organization, and advising on career options and opportunities. Seeds Planters are part of Mn/DOT's department-wide mentoring program, Lighting the Road to Success, which is administered through the Human Resource Office. While other employees may elect to have a mentor, program guidelines provide that a mentor be assigned to each Seeds student.

continued on page 57