

Whitecap Executive Management Academy Adult Literacy and Job Placement January 28-29, 2003

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Introduction

The Whitecap Foundation Executive Management Academy convened an Adult Literacy and Job Placement workshop with over 20 adult literacy and job placement providers. The purpose was to review the existing adult literacy and job placement program models to determine:

- best practices in existing programs;
- evaluation techniques and practices;
- characteristics of an “ideal” program; and
- potential models to develop.

In their discussions, the participants touched upon the major elements that they felt were common across successful programs. The discussion also yielded a number of core weaknesses that organizations should be aware of when starting, running or updating a literacy program. The group exchanged ideas about how to improve their programs and avoid some potential pitfalls. A description of the lessons learned is outlined in this report.

BACKGROUND: THE WHITECAP EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT ACADEMY

In 1997, the Whitecap Foundation launched the Executive Management Academy (EMA) to provide quality leadership training and technical assistance designed specifically to help its grantees develop the capacity to fulfill these expectations. The EMA trainings are presented in an environment where participants can exchange and examine new ideas and share professional experiences. Through the exchange, participants enhance their own knowledge and skills in order to lead their organizations more effectively.

Most of Whitecap’s grantees are smaller, community-based organizations that otherwise have minimal access to management training. Given the profile of Whitecap’s grantees, the goals for the program are:

1. Provide high quality, in-depth management/executive training sessions which are designed to improve the grantees’ ability to provide quality service to clients;
2. Create a “community” of nonprofits who have developed and grown together, and can continue to share ideas, best practices, and solutions to common problems; and
3. Instill in the grantees a sense of confidence about their leadership capabilities and styles.

THE ADULT LITERACY AND JOB PLACEMENT PROGRAMS WORKSHOP

Lessons Learned

A number of lessons emerged from the workshop, reflecting both successes and concerns common to the different organizations represented. These lessons highlight the complex interdependence of adult literacy and job placement. They are organized into the following five prevailing themes, along with the predominant challenges associated with each one.

1. The importance of a holistic approach to adult literacy.

At the beginning of the workshop, the participants agreed that it was important to establish a collective working definition of adult literacy. They determined that a holistic definition of “literacy” is required in their work, going far beyond English language and mathematics skills. Other critical elements of this definition were:

- “Life skills,” including understanding and navigating logistics of shopping, health care, transportation, utilities and other services, and governmental and other organizational bureaucracies.
- Core job skills, including computer and other technological abilities.
- Societal awareness and cultural development, in order to adapt themselves and their families to the opportunities and demands of the dominant social and economic culture.
- Critical job skills training in students’ first language, in order to speed and ensure competency.

Challenges to this holistic approach include:

- A lack of appreciation, including by funders and governmental entities, of the needs and challenges involved in adult literacy and job placement.
- The resource-intensive nature of this holistic approach, and the lack of adequate resources.
- The difficulty of assembling teaching staff, paid or volunteer, to address all of these needs.
- The complex array of personal obstacles that make it difficult for the adult students to make and maintain a commitment to achieving functional literacy.

2. The need for a client-focused learning environment.

This country is facing a crisis in its failure to educate millions of children whose first language is English, and who are enrolled in full-time public school. It is logical that even greater challenges confront adult education in a population that facing one or more obstacles, including language, transportation, affordable housing, multiple low-paying

jobs, childcare, immigrant documentation, and indifference or hostility from the dominant culture. Consequently, successful education of these adults requires the creation of a client-focused learning environment with the following characteristics:

- ❑ Building a staff with the experience, knowledge, language, and cultural sensitivity to work effectively with the adult student population.
- ❑ Establishing a safe, secure and confidential environment to engender the trust and peace of mind critical for effective learning.
- ❑ Identifying and aligning program goals with the students' dreams, in order to establish program credibility and motivate adult students.
- ❑ Creating opportunities to instill and reinforce the students' understanding that they are able to learn, empowering them and inspiring hope and confidence in their ability to advance their position.
- ❑ Developing flexible, evolving programs that can change to meet students' needs, with small classes and one-on-one attention and support.
- ❑ Valuing students' life experiences and incorporating them into the learning process, and using success stories to help further a vision of personal possibilities.
- ❑ Developing a sense of community, both locally with teachers and other students acting as role models, and on a broader scale to create a sense of powerful identity with a population of learners.
- ❑ Establishing client accountability to instill responsibility for their own progress, as well as prepare them for better employment and career advancement.

Obstacles to creating this learning environment include:

- The lack of resources, including finances, staff and space, required for such a client-focused supportive learning environment.
- The inability of adult students to make and sustain a commitment to learning, due to the demands of multiple jobs, parenting and the lack of childcare, transportation, and various other logistical and personal challenges.
- Student fear of failure and resistance to learning/change.
- The difficulty obtaining and retaining competent, committed paid and volunteer staff.
- Developing effective assessment to place learners at the proper learning levels.
- Employing evaluation methods and criteria that yield useful information without disempowering or discouraging learners.

3. The ideal elements for effective job placement.

The participants agreed that, to achieve the desired success with clients, their organizations need to do much more than simply place applicants in jobs. Effective job placement also included the following aspects:

- ❑ Determining criteria that properly relate labor demand to applicant needs and capabilities.
- ❑ Appropriate applicant testing and assessment, addressing both needs and skills.
- ❑ Helping applicants set realistic and appropriate goals.
- ❑ Placing applicants in positions that provide a living wage.

Challenges to effective job placement include:

- The state of the economy.
- Cultural attitudes towards immigrant applicants, including the exploitation of undocumented workers.
- Legal status of immigrant applicants.

4. The value of ongoing support.

Participants reported that job placement does not ensure applicant success. In order to achieve the long-term advancement that the programs seek, applicants require ongoing support and encouragement, including:

- ❑ Intensive case management, with job coaching and opportunities for continuing education leading to job promotion/career advancement.
- ❑ Encouraging employers to support ongoing learning and development of placed applicants.
- ❑ Incorporating continuing literacy education with on-the-job training.
- ❑ Working with applicants to set realistic and achievable goals.
- ❑ Developing effective evaluation methods, with appropriate benchmarks, to assess applicants' progress towards career and other goals.

Challenges to effective job placement include:

- The lack of resources to meet all of the applicants' needs, from education through placement and ongoing support.
- Employer resistance to committing resources to support continued growth and learning.
- The difficulties of creating and implementing effective evaluation.
- The challenges of staying in contact with clients, in a population that tends to move frequently and fall out of touch.

5. The value of partnering with other organizations.

The participants were able to gain a great deal through sharing information about their programs, challenges, and past solutions. As a result, their awareness and appreciation of the opportunities for further collaboration increased. Specifically, they saw potential for:

- ❑ Continuing to network with one another to increase sharing of challenges and solutions.
- ❑ Collaborating with other service providers, including government entities and programs, to address resource issues.
- ❑ Combining with similar organizations to work for change through advocacy.

Obstacles to partnering include:

- A lack of awareness of other organizations' programs and activities, in order to seek advice and assistance.
- Prior inexperience with advocacy.
- Resource strain in delivering core programs and fulfilling goals.
- Lack of understanding, appreciation, and cooperation among funders, other organizations, and government entities.

APPENDIX

Workshop Data

Working Definition of “Literacy”

The group discussed the meaning of “literacy” and noted that, to be effective, it must mean more than just reading and writing. For workshop participants, “literacy” includes:

- “ESL” – learn to read, write, and do math in English
- Basic skill development – variety of core skills necessary for employment
- More than just language:
 - Conscious of society in which they live/are seeking work
 - Basic language skills
 - Cultural development
- Computer literacy
- Note challenge that many clients are illiterate in their first language

Core Program Areas

Participants identified the following elements/areas as core to literacy/job placement programs:

- Basic literacy – functional/life skills
- Show that clients are able to learn
- Time management/balancing
- Stipend/support
- Mental health referral
- Assessment of career and other skills; set goals and benchmarks
- Intensive case management
 - Job coaching
 - Continuing education
- “Functional context” literacy
- Leadership development
- Technology skills development
- Prepare for reality – accountability
- Comprehensive needs assessment
- Partnerships with other organizations and employers
- Job choice/enjoyment

Aggregated Breakout Session Data

Program Goals

- Employment
- Develop a core curriculum
- Develop benchmarks
- Establish role modeling
- Stability
- Establish open climate
- Satisfy living wage
- Dealing with limited resources
- Address learning problems
- Sustainable funding
- Self-sufficiency
- Hope for the future (for clients)
- Raise reading level
- Establish individual accountability

What Attracts Clients

- Quality of staff – experience, knowledge, language, cultural sensitivity
- Holistic approach
- Empowering students
- Teachers role-model values and skills
- Success stories
- Welcoming, informal environment
- One-one-one service
- Dreams of students become educators' goal
- Availability – hours, transportation, childcare
- Sense of contribution and being part of a world-wide community of learners
- Word of mouth
- Valuing students' past/backgrounds
- Designed to meet students' needs – evolving, not stagnant
- Staff available, lack of bureaucracy
- Security and confidentiality
- Staff
- Participants shown their ability to learn

Program Strengths

- Attentive to client needs
- Holistic approach
- Communication and dialogue
- Serve a range of clients
- Staff is passionate and culturally sensitive
- Accessible services
- Clients trust staff
- Partnerships with other organizations/schools/etc.
- Entryway to more education
- Constantly updating curriculum
- Serve neediest clients
- Strong reputation
- Clients tell own success stories
- Large array of services
- Small program size – flexible and direct
- Aware of job requirements
- Desire of clients to participate
- Accountability – high standards, good relationships with students
- Continuous training model

Program Obstacles

- Resources – money, time, staff space
- Participant reluctance
- High volunteer turnover – limited funds for stipends/salary
- Funder requirements
- Tracking clients is difficult
- Lack of jobs (post-9/11)
- State restrictions on some programs
- Difficulty encouraging healthy/ appropriate learning environment
- Involvement w/ government org's – e.g., Workforce Investment Act
- Bankrupt public education system
- Lack of commitment from partners (funders, other organizations, etc.)
- Staff patience/commitment
- Holistic approach is resource-intensive
- Non-credit for job referral
- Staff commitment vs. just a “job”
- Immigration restrictions
- Climate of fear
- Economy exploits poor/uneducated people
- Seen as social service instead of employment agency

Clients Requesting/Needs Not Met:

- Specific classes, e.g., job training
- English & Spanish literacy and vocational ESL
- Home schooling options for working adults
- Increase in one-on-one tutoring
- Stipends
- Skills training in primary language
- Jobs within community
- Affordable housing
- Need volunteers to sit w/ students in evening
- Clients and employers requesting training in “soft skills
- Childcare
- Transportation help
- Engaging community

Program Weaknesses

- Underutilized capacity
- Marketing – getting word out
- Lack of communication/advocacy as a group
- Lack of collaborations
- Too much firefighting – need to be more proactive
- Need for “life issues” support – domestic violence, financial management, stress
- Lack of funds/resources
- Lack of program coordination
- Prejudice – misconceptions of population served
- Fear of deportation
- Not enough training to deliver higher level training (e.g. tech)
- Difficulty defining, measuring, and communicating outcomes

Evaluation

- Learning contracts with students
- Encourage improvements
- Customer feedback (surveys, focus groups, “secret shopper”)
- Portfolio assessment
- Self assessment, superiors assessment
- Employees – personal internal goals
- Client placement and promotions
- Comparing program evaluations with school system evaluations
- Track outcome, impact, and results and use information
- Outcome-based (funding-related)
- Post-training surveys
- Random sampling of clients
- Organizational development, strategic plan workplans
- Balanced score card
- Outside evaluators (clients, staff, other groups)
- Pre- and post- testing
- Quarterly goals from funders
- Track student progress in class and overall in program
- Alternative measures of personal progress

Obstacles/Solutions

- Ongoing creation of a healthy environment – staff development
- Funding
- Education system
- Networking opportunities for front-line staff
- Establish concrete evaluation process
- Program design
- Lack of benchmarks
- Job referrals

Improvements/Alterations/New Designs

- Evaluations for internal meetings to measure effectiveness
- Establish referral network for funding
- Charter School
- Establish point/incentive system for benchmarks/achievement – e.g. Learning Center trade for food items
- Training for volunteers
- Network and develop relationships/partnerships
- Purchase standardized test (Skillsbank software)
- Determine evaluation standard – portfolio, pre/post testing
- Empowerment – work with public school system
- Further develop curriculum – blueprint of linguistic objectives
- Joining forces/collaborating re. political/advocacy aspects
- Develop job opportunities through board members and their contacts