



Case Study *January 2007*

Community-Based Learning Opportunities for
Aboriginal People, Winner, 2006

The Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada

At a Glance

- The AFOA serves Aboriginal people interested in management and finance, and in being active participants and contributors in their communities.
- Effective management is the key to building social and economic prosperity, and is essential to successful Aboriginal governance.
- Through its innovative teaching and delivery approaches, the AFOA helps to build the financial and management practices and skills of interested Aboriginals.
- Using technology and e-learning practices, program activities focus on capacity development through relevant, accessible and up-to-date learning and networking opportunities, and the sharing of best practices.

OVERVIEW

The Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada (AFOA) is a non-profit organization that helps to build the financial and management practices and skills of Aboriginal people so that they can better manage and govern their communities. Established in 2000, AFOA has achieved its successes by focusing on capacity development and providing relevant, accessible and up-to-date learning opportunities, ample networking, and chances to share best practices through technology and e-learning practices.

AFOA's premise is that effective management is key to building social and economic prosperity, and that it is essential to successful Aboriginal governance. AFOA is contributing to a better quality of life for Aboriginal people.

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
The Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada

Date Established
2000

Skills Developed
Financial and management skills

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OBJECTIVES

AFOA's objective is to build capacity in Aboriginal finance and management by:

- providing certification and professional development in finance and management;
- offering online learning resources and tools;
- promoting best practices, networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities;
- recognizing effective management practices through an awards program; and
- facilitating the entry of Aboriginal youth into finance and management careers.

TARGET GROUPS

AFOA serves Aboriginal people interested in management and finance, and in being active participants and contributors in their communities.

ACTIVITIES

AFOA's programs and services offered to individual and organizational members include the following:

1. The Aboriginal Financial Management (AFM) Educational Program and Certified Aboriginal Financial Manager (CAFM) Designation

The AFM program is based on professional competencies that Aboriginal financial managers require. Developed in cooperation with the Certified General Accountants (CGA) Association of Canada, the AFM aligns itself with the first three levels of the CGA program, while maintaining a focus on the particular challenges found in Aboriginal environments.

Once they have successfully completed all 14 AFM program requirements and attained an AFOA diploma in Aboriginal Financial Management, candidates are eligible to write a professional exam (which ensures that those who receive their professional designation have the necessary knowledge base) to receive the CAFM designation. After 24 months of full-time practical work experience, gained in a public or private Aboriginal financial management environment, candidates are recognized as having the competencies to act as Certified Aboriginal Financial Managers.

AFOA offers members a management certificate program. The courses focus on general applied management skills and knowledge required by senior managers in Aboriginal communities.

CAFM designates bring to an organization accounting, financial management, human resources, and information technology skills and knowledge—all within the context of the Aboriginal experience.

A CAFM designation:

- ensures that individuals are up-to-date on the latest Aboriginal financial management practices;
- demonstrates a commitment to lifelong learning;
- is a mark of professionalism;
- is one of the preferred credentials for Aboriginal financial management positions; and
- gives the individual a competitive edge.

2. Management Certificate Online Professional Development

AFOA offers individual and organizational members a management certificate program through its e-learning platform. The courses focus on general applied management skills and knowledge required by senior managers in Aboriginal communities. Courses offered include community economic development, Aboriginal management practices, Aboriginal program management, and values and ethics in the Aboriginal workplace.

3. The Aboriginal Centre for Finance and Management Excellence

The Aboriginal Centre for Finance and Management Excellence, found on the AFOA website (www.afoa.ca), is a one-stop web portal for Aboriginal people across the country interested in enhancing their capacity in finance and management.

The Centre offers a wealth of resources, toolkits, best practices and reference documents on financial management, applied management and governance. Other information available includes issues of the *Journal of Aboriginal Management*; information on scholarships, fellowships and awards for Aboriginal managers; a career centre for posting job openings and résumés; and presentations and proceedings from AFOA's national conference and regional workshops.

4. The Distributed Knowledge Sharing System (DKS)

The DKS provides an online platform for First Nations communities to turn to when developing or implementing effective and practical financial management tools. The DKS enables First Nations to develop their own financial policies and community governance initiatives—including band government codes, policies on leadership selection and financial management, and accountability policies—with the benefit of models, samples and the experiences of other communities. DKS makes relevant and timely information available to all First Nations communities.

5. The AFOA Discussion Board

The AFOA discussion board is an online forum for discussion of Aboriginal financial and management issues. Currently, discussion areas are divided into financial management and accounting topics, with 16 subtopic areas (such as financial reporting and loan/debt management), and general management topics, with 9 subtopic areas (such as human resources and office procedures).

RESOURCES

The core AFM courses are offered three times a year in an e-learning environment. Each semester is 12 weeks long and is presided over by an online instructor. AFM students are provided with an orientation, online reading links, ongoing support and a mentoring service.

INNOVATIONS

AFOA uses innovative teaching delivery approaches to overcome the challenges and barriers faced by Aboriginal people interested in developing their skills and contributing to their communities.

CERTIFIED ABORIGINAL FINANCIAL MANAGER

- The CAFM designation is the only one of its kind in the world.
- CAFM designates receive advanced standing in the CGA program.

ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- The professional development course software is designed to enable trouble-free access from communities with low bandwidth capabilities.

AFOA tailors a financial management educational program to the Canadian Aboriginal context.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- AFOA seeks to support effective governance and enhance the quality of life of Aboriginal people by improving the finance and management skills of those managing and governing their communities and organizations.
- AFOA develops management capacity by providing accessible learning opportunities, networking and sharing of best practices through technology and e-learning practices.
- AFOA tailors a financial management educational program to the Canadian Aboriginal context, focusing on challenges unique to Aboriginal environments.
- AFOA provides e-tools to help communities learn from the experiences of other First Nations.

OUTCOMES

Membership Growth: AFOA is a membership-based organization whose growth is an indication of its merit. As of March 2006, AFOA had 977 members across 65 per cent of the 614 First Nations communities in Canada.

AFM Registration: Approximately 150 students register for the AFM courses every year, with a significant number going on to pursue CAFM designation.

CAFM Designations: Since its inception, the AFOA has certified 306 CAFMs across the country, and the CAFM is becoming the preferred credential sought by Aboriginal employers.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

AFOA's capacity-building activities are creating positive change in Aboriginal communities. They are truly building capacity and, in turn, Aboriginal communities and organizations are better managed. One indicator of this change is that the number of federal government interventions (which take place when a community receives an adverse audit report or when its cumulative deficit equals 8 per cent or more of total annual revenues) has steadily declined since 2000.

Positive change can also be seen in the increase in Aboriginal success stories. For example, Shoal Lake, Manitoba, with its 200 members, implemented a remedial management plan and, within a year, was self-managed and without debt. Also, Pictou Landing First Nation, in Nova Scotia, won the United Nations Habitat Diversity Award for its community planning initiative.

Finally, together with Xerox Canada, AFOA sponsors the Excellence in Aboriginal Leadership Awards, which recognize Aboriginal people who have enhanced management, performance and governance through their financial management leadership and skills. Since the awards were first awarded in 2002, there has been a significant increase in submissions and in the level of quality of those submissions—also indicative of positive change.

As a non-profit, non-political body, AFOA acts as an agent of change outside the political arena.

USE AS A MODEL

As a non-profit, non-political body, AFOA acts as an agent of change outside the political arena. It has the potential to be a model for similar organizations at the centre of future Aboriginal capacity development initiatives, particularly as emphasis grows on developing capacity among First Nations and enabling communities to progress towards full self-governance. For example, AFOA has been asked to develop an Aboriginal Housing Manager's Educational and Certification Program, and the organization is being used as a model for a First Nations Housing Managers Association.

Acknowledgements

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About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resources requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded, in part, by Human Resources and Social Development Canada's National Office of Literacy and Learning.

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Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada

By *Douglas Watt*

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