

# A National Digital Library to Support U.S. Adult Foundational Education

A Concept Paper by the AFE Digital Library Group  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary and an accompanying concept paper propose creation of a national Adult Foundational Education (AFE) Digital Library. This networked system would coordinate and add to existing resource collections (e.g., LINCS, ERIC, archived materials at universities and other institutions) to make relevant information more accessible to adult foundational education providers, adult learners, researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders.

### **The Problem**

Millions of U.S. adults have gaps in the foundational (i.e., basic literacy, numeracy, and other communication and problem-solving) skills they need for work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles. This is despite decades of significant efforts to provide adult education and other supports to this diverse and important population.

Experienced adult foundational education researchers and advocates share a concern that significant valuable research and other resources are difficult or impossible for educators and other partners to access. These resources:

- include curricula; assessment and evaluation instruments; strategies for partnership building, program planning, professional development, funding, and policy; reports of meetings; and other published and unpublished materials;
- have been developed by practitioners, researchers, policy makers, adult learners, and other stakeholders in the U.S. and other countries;
- were supported by diverse public-and private-sector investments;
- provide an historical record and data that can be used by researchers and other stakeholders to make AFE services more effective and available for the millions of U.S. adults who have gaps in their foundational skills.

This inadequate accessibility is due to multiple factors, including:

- Existing collections sometimes have restrictions on the amount and age of the resources they can make available, the efficiency of the technologies they use (e.g., non-operating links), and the staffing they can devote to updating collections.
- Some resources are copyright-protected, making them expensive or otherwise difficult to access.
- Many older resources are out of print and never digitized and made available on-line.

- Several previous “go-to” sources on important topics (e.g., public policy, corporate and union involvement, contextualized and integrated AFE) are now closed and the resources they previously made available are now difficult or impossible to access.
- Many useful resources are stored on specialized websites (e.g., of universities, non-profits, state and local adult literacy resource centers, and international agencies), but those sites are often hard to find and/or difficult to navigate.

Exacerbating these gaps is the fact that there are (a) limited coordination across existing collections and (b) a general lack of awareness within the AFE field about the existence, value, and location of such resources.

These access limitations undermine the effectiveness of research, planning, partnership-development, professional development, instructional and other supports, policies, funding, and other key elements of AFE efforts. This is evident when there is renewed interest in topics for which our field had previously developed expertise, funding, and networks. (These topics include social justice, workplace literacy, awareness raising, learner leadership, uses of digital technologies, contextualized learning and integrated services, and adult basic education systems reform.) Though many resources on those topics have previously been developed, those wanting to tackle those subjects now often do so with little or no awareness that resources already exist that they could learn from, build on, and adapt to current conditions. Too often stakeholders are starting from scratch, relying on trial and error, and reinventing wheels.

## **Proposed Solutions**

We propose a national “Adult Foundational Education (AFE) Digital Library.” Borrowing from emerging digital library and more traditional municipal library system models, this system would have a central “main library” as a hub which would support and coordinate both existing specialized “satellite” collections (or “spokes” connected to the central hub) and -- when appropriate -- new collections.

These strengthened, coordinated collections would help diverse stakeholders in the AFE field (e.g., AFE service providers, policy makers, researchers, and other current and potential partners) to efficiently access relevant, high-quality digitized documents and other resources (e.g., video and audio recordings). Stakeholders would thereby be better able to perform their roles and improve the quality and quantity of supports for adult and out-of-school youth learners.

The creation of an AFE Digital Library would be done through a collaborative effort of individuals and institutions working in AFE and “digital libraries.” This effort would build on the significant work previously done in both fields, further strengthen the institutions that are currently making digitized AFE-related resources available, and make those existing resources -- and new ones that might have gotten lost over time -- more easily available to AFE providers and other stakeholders. Teams of

professionals would do this work in a multi-year, five-phase project:

### Phase I: Securing of Seed Funding for Initial Planning

Members of our AFE Digital Library Group and other supporters of this proposed project will (a) identify one or more “digital library partners” and “AFE research and professional development experts” and (b) secure modest seed funding to support and implement the initial planning to be carried out in Phase II described below. Funding might come from one or more sources that recognize the importance of making important research and other resources available to the AFE field.

### Phase II: Initial Planning

Using the seed funding generated in Phase I, a small team of AFE and digital library experts will – with guidance from a Professional Advisory Committee composed of representatives of current collections and other relevant institutions – (a) carry out a needs assessment showing the potential users of a new AFE Digital Library, the information they might use, and gaps in the contents and accessibility of current collections; (b) identify how a new AFE Digital Library system can provide AFE stakeholders with useful information and networks; and (c) develop a plan that shows components of a more-effective digital resource-sharing system and actions and resources needed to create and sustain such a system.

In particular, the plan will show how to identify, gather, review, organize (using an agreed-upon thesaurus of categories and criteria and a robust database), and digitize the information that would be accessible through this system. This plan would be based on information contained in the accompanying concept paper and on additional input from AFE and digital library experts. The plan would be approved by the Professional Advisory Committee and submitted to funders to secure funding for the piloting and further implementation of the proposed AFE Digital Library described in Phases III, IV, and V below.

### Phase III: Assembly of AFE Digital Library Components

With approval and funding for Phases III, IV, and V secured, the initial project team of experts and advisors would put in place a more-permanent, qualified staff and administrative supports at a central “hub library.” (This hub might be based at one of the institutions that currently host AFE resource collections, as they already have expertise and resources related to AFE and digital archiving in place.)

Guided by the plan prepared in Phase II, the new “hub” staff will prepare for the launch of the Phase IV pilot project by working with “satellite” collections to:

- Clarify the diverse audiences to be targeted and relevant information to focus on in the pilot phase. Audiences might include policy makers, public and private funders, AFE instructional and administrative staff, diverse populations of adult learners, researchers, and stakeholders concerned about particular life challenges adult learners face. Topics might include:

- AFE policy, funding, and system reform
  - AFE for diverse purposes
    - workforce development for incumbent workers and job seeker;
    - public health;
    - criminal justice reform;
    - immigrant and refugee integration;
    - services for people with special needs (neurodiverse learners and/or individuals with physical disabilities);
    - environmental sustainability;
    - democracy and social justice.
  - AFE teaching/learning strategies
  - AFE management strategies
  - AFE resources for learners on “AFE learner leadership” and “AFE resources for self-study.”
- Emphasize making resources available in “user-friendly” ways (e.g., annotated bibliographies with up-to-date links to digital copies; research brief and fact sheet summaries of particular topics; recordings of webinars and other video presentations) and putting them in place in satellite collections for system launch.
  - Use agreed-upon digital resource-sharing technologies to (a) systematically organize, store disseminate, and track collections at each satellite and (b) coordinate the satellite collections across the overall Digital Library.

#### Phase IV: Piloting of an Initial Round of AFE Digital Library Collections

The project team would field-test a small, pilot version of the newly-created system (developed in Phase III) which would make relevant resources more easily available to selected audiences. This new system would be introduced, implemented, monitored, and improved by:

- Presenting the AFE Digital Library as a way to help stakeholders create and continuously improve an updated national system of AFE and other supports for adult learners;
- Announcing availability of pilot collections to target audiences in the existing AFE field and other stakeholders. This would be done by providing publicity about the collection and developing and implementing training for using it;
- Monitoring how many users access the system, what they use, and how they use it. User feedback and other relevant information will be collected and analyzed to guide ongoing improvements in content and user-friendliness of the pilot collections and future collections.

Based on these pilot activities, the project team and participating partners would make improvements in existing collections and, if necessary, create new collections, to improve how resources are stored and made available.

## Phase V: Implementation and Ongoing Improvement of the AFE Digital Library

The project team would further strengthen and expand the pilot version of the system based on (a) results of the Phase IV pilot; and (b) successful securing of additional resources and partnerships with user groups and other resource collections.

### **Supports Requested for Phase II and Subsequent Phases**

To ensure that this effort is based on a solid plan and a collaborative foundation, we seek seed funding to support the above Phase II “initial planning” activities. Phase II budget items will include:

- Compensation for initial consultants with relevant expertise in AFE and digital libraries;
- Stipends/honoraria for Professional Advisory Committee members;
- Equipment and facilities costs (for in-person and/or remote work);
- Postage and shipping costs;
- Travel (for possible in-person meetings and conference participation to promote the effort).

Based on the plan resulting from Phase II, additional funding would be sought from the funders of Phase II and/or other sources to carry out Phase III (Assembly of AFE Digital Library Components), Phase IV (Piloting of an Initial Round of AFE Digital Library Collections), and Phase V (Implementation and Ongoing Improvement of the AFE Digital Library).

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