

# **Perceived Barriers to Somali Immigrant Employment in Lewiston A Supplement to Maine's Department of Labor Report**

Community-Based Research Project for  
Anthropology 339 *Production and Reproduction*  
Bates College Department of Anthropology  
Fall 2008

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	p.1
Methodology	p.2
Background	p.3
Job Seekers' Perspectives	p.5
Employers' Perspectives	p.10
Best Practices	p.15
Benefits	p.17
Acknowledgements	p.20
Executive Summary	p.21
Appendix	p.22

## **Introduction**

In the wake of the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL) Report on Somali employment patterns (<http://www.state.me.us/labor/lmis/pdf/Lewiston%20Migrant%20Report.pdf>), released in the spring of 2008, a large number of community representatives felt the need of additional research. At several meetings of community leaders about the MDOL Report, Bates College anthropologist Dr. Elizabeth A. Eames offered to incorporate a community-based research project into her upcoming comparative economics class. The students of Anthropology 339 were asked by the Career Center and the Chamber of Commerce to focus upon why formal employment opportunities for L/A's Somalis have been limited, despite the stark reality that so many of our long-time employees are reaching retirement age. With financial support from The Harvard Center for Community Partnerships and the logistical assistance of Lewiston Adult Education, STTAR Consultancy Services, as well as the aforementioned Career Center and Chamber of Commerce, our class conducted a series of focus groups with over 20 Somali job seekers and more than 20 potential employers in order to gather information regarding

barriers to Somali employment. The results allow us to provide you with some answers to this question, including a run down of the best practices of local employers, as well as observations concerning the benefits of increasing refugee employment. Let us draw your attention to our **Executive Summary** on page 21 and an **Appendix** containing our assessment of some gaps in the MDOL Report on page 22.

It should be noted that we embarked upon this project before the financial crash of October 2008; we complete this report in the midst of the ensuing fiscal turmoil. Barriers to Somali employment seem much less penetrable in December than they did in September, yet the refugee community's needs are certainly no less severe.

## **Methodology**

Having won financial support from the Harvard Center and the approval of Bates' Institutional Review Board (IRB), the seventeen members of our senior seminar in Anthropology conducted four focus groups and two interviews over the course of eight weeks in the fall of 2008. One of the focus groups consisted of participants in The New Mainers Workforce Partnership (NMWP-LA), funded by Coastal Enterprises Incorporated (CEI), Jobs for Low-Income Families (JOLI) and the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL). While these students have not been employed locally, each had a good enough understanding of the English language for the focus group to be conducted entirely in English.

The second job seekers' focus group was made up of Somalis enrolled in the Employability Training for ASPIRE Participants program held by STTAR Consultancy Services. These refugees had histories of limited or no employment in the U.S. and few

job-search skills. Since their English was very limited, this focus group was conducted with the help of a translator.

Moreover, we held three meetings with employers. One was an interview with a human resource specialist at a large employer in Lewiston, the other two were focus groups coordinated through the Androscoggin Chamber of Commerce, with over twenty area employers represented.

The final piece of research entailed interviewing people employed as mediators between employers and potential employees.

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and shared amongst members of the class, which was broken into five working groups of three for reporting purposes. Two of the seniors took leadership roles and they produced a first combined draft of this report, the professor taking responsibility for a final edit. During the research, we obtained consent forms from all participants, promised to keep respondents' identities as anonymous as possible. We compensated interviewees in the job seekers' group for their time. We reported our findings at a luncheon of the Androscoggin Chamber of Commerce on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 (a videotape is available from [eeames@bates.edu](mailto:eeames@bates.edu)).

### **Background Information on Lewiston's Immigrant Populations**

We began by familiarizing ourselves with Lewiston, Maine's long history as an immigrant city. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Lewiston emerged as a textile manufacturing center. The local industry started growing around 1850, when Irish refugees of the potato famine began arriving to the city. These generally unskilled and impoverished immigrants mostly became day laborers. Subject to suspicion and

discrimination, Anti-Irish sentiment climaxed with the torching of the Irish Catholic Chapel in 1855 (Leamon 1976: 15).

In the late 1860s another immigrant population began arriving in Lewiston—the French-Canadians. They began arriving at a rate of 100 to 150 people per day, and by 1880, 35 percent of Lewiston’s population was foreign born (Leamon 1976: 17). With the turn of the century came the arrival of even more immigrant groups, including Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Lithuanians, bringing their languages, religions, and customs. These immigrants may have originally intended to return home after a short stay in Lewiston, but many became the city’s permanent workforce. Immigrant population growth slowed beginning around 1930 when the mills failed to adjust to changed production dynamics, leading to a decline in prosperity in Lewiston, though many of the immigrants’ descendants have remained, their cultures ingrained by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the late 1980s a civil war broke out in the East African region known as Somalia. The violence caused widespread famine and displacement. One million refugees fled the country, some crossing the border into Kenya and others relocating elsewhere. In 1999 the United States began re-settling Somalis in select cities such as Atlanta, Columbus and Minneapolis. They were mostly assigned to low rent, poverty-stricken urban centers, and many Somalis began to look to resettle elsewhere in the United States. Portland, Maine, with low crime rates and good educational opportunities, had much to offer this population. Portland’s public housing, however, could not meet demand from the newcomers, and by 2001 Somalis began moving north into Lewiston (Mother Jones 2004). Throughout this period, some families were being resettled directly to Lewiston, but the vast majority was secondary migrants.

Two distinct groups from Somalia have made Lewiston their new home—the so-called ethnic Somalis and Somali Bantu. The latter group began arriving in 2005. They are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from the dominant Somali group, and have remained marginalized since their arrival (UNHCR 2002). The majorities were farmers in Somalia; because of their rural existence and second class status, the Bantu community had little opportunity of formal education (<http://wiki.colby.edu/display/AY298B/Home>).

Now embedded in a fully monetized and commodified economy, many New Mainers have struggled with financial stability; a steady wage income is crucial when it comes to taking care of a family in this city, yet a devastating unemployment problem remains for Lewiston's relatively new immigrant population.

While the current official unemployment rate of Lewiston's population as a whole is roughly 6.8 percent and rapidly climbing in the current economic downturn (Career Center interview 2008), the recent Department of Labor Report stated that up to 2006 just under 50 percent of Somalis had any sort of formal employment. Moreover, the report declares that the employment rate for males is much higher than that for females. The dismal state of the global economy in 2008 does not explain this particular discrepancy in employment rates across population groups—we set out to explore the additional factors, the key barriers, as understood by both potential employees and employers.

### **Somali Job Seekers' Perceptions of Barriers to Employment**

In our interviews with job seeking Somalis, the largest hurdle was consistently proclaimed to be language skills. Many are enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages programs. Yet their linguistic struggle continues on a day to day basis: “As

soon as I came to Lewiston,” one potential employee stated, “I saw that all of the jobs will ask you if you can speak English—English, that is the main problem.” Although one of the group interviews was conducted entirely in English, the language barrier was mentioned by people in both groups as the largest roadblock they encounter. New Mainers mentioned the need for assistance in filling out applications for job openings. As one New Mainer stated, “There is no way I can fill out applications for myself... I fill out applications all the time, but I don’t know if I am filling them out correctly—I never get answers.” Some New Mainers solve this problem by bringing a friend with them to help with the application, yet in many cases they have been turned down or turned away on account of “unauthorized assistance.” Delayed feedback or, more often and more poignantly, non-existent responses were a common concern among workforce trainees: “The more we try...there will [still] be no answer” one workforce trainee mentions.

Interviews have been cut short because of language barriers and miscommunication or misunderstandings have occurred on the job in some instances. One man avers, in English, that “my English is broken... maybe some English I understand, but my talk is not good.” He mentions a past problem in communication saying “when I wanted to ask my supervisor something... maybe I ask it the wrong way.” Other New Mainers voiced similar concerns, saying that they felt as though they were still not considered for jobs, even jobs not requiring English on a day to day basis. One man related a conversation with a person in human resources: “I’m strong as you see me, and I don’t speak the language, but if you show me how to do things, I can do it.” Another participant stated that “back home was completely different...they show you,

whether you know that job or not, they will train you. But here in America the gate to get that job is just language, period.”

Second to learning the English language, educational requirements for many of the jobs in Lewiston have become a seemingly insurmountable barrier for New Mainers trying to enter the workforce. Participants in our focus groups discussed how the GED requirements have stopped them from getting jobs with which they had prior experience and for which they would otherwise be qualified. One participant in the second employee focus group stated “they told me that if you don’t have any GED or diploma we can’t hire you...And I told what I did, because when I came in USA I worked four jobs and I told them I do these jobs, and I need that kind of jobs if you guys have, and they say we don’t hire the people doesn’t have any GED or diploma.” Revealingly, this participant had done similar work in four other American states, yet in Lewiston his relevant experience was not considered, sans GED. Many informants relayed similar incidents, stating that their skills are being disregarded, even from jobs that require no English at all. New Mainers are baffled by businesses, such as housekeeping, that demand high levels of education for basic work. We were asked why one would need a GED to clean a house? Questions like these embody cross-cultural misunderstanding because while they may make sense to many Americans, to the cultural outsider they are mystifying and insulting.

Members of our focus groups had obtained education in other countries; however, Maine has no system to formally acknowledge the legitimacy of such educational attainment. One woman had earned her degree as a pharmacy technician, yet was unable to use her degree in the United States, “But here—I don’t know...even [with] school training for pharmacy technician,” she said, “even having a certificate, [I still] have to

look for housekeeping work.” This is one example of what many other participants mentioned—trouble obtaining jobs for which they are way over qualified. Just one more example from our group: a man had earned a law degree in Somalia and is yet unable to find any employment in Lewiston. These trained individuals with non-transferable certificates are all too common amongst immigrant job seekers. Hard earned degrees are laid to waste and past education is almost completely ignored.

Religion, an issue often thought to be a potential barrier for New Mainers seeking employment, was not voiced as a major concern. One refugee stated “yes, I am religious and I do pray and never had a problem with that... it is just five minutes every break.” One man mentioned that he writes on his application for jobs that he will need five minutes to pray during breaks so that the employer is aware of this from the outset. More communication on this subject between employers and employees as well as amongst fellow employees would appear to be beneficial. Religion however was not considered to be one of the major barriers to employment by these potential new hires.

On the other hand, a consensus emerged concerning barriers created by online applications or computer competency tests. One participant emphasized “if you can’t speak the language, you can’t use the computer.” Many of the people in the focus groups discussed how the computer skills requirements constantly stood in their way. One man explained that he encountered a computer-based application yet the only computer skill he would have needed was for punching in and out. Another was especially distraught over being fired for his *inability* to clock in and clock out in his workplace. While he had the skills necessary to complete the job itself, he was not shown how to record the work he had done, in the process losing not only many hours of hard labor, but indeed,



eventually, the job itself. How might this tragedy have been averted? Potential employees have come to think the online application is used simply as a means of eliminating them as prospective employees. They believe Lewiston area employers are judging them on their novice computer skills and not according to their ability to perform on the job. Can we assure potential employees that those requirements are in fact truly necessary, rather than a covert mechanism of weeding them systematically out of the applicant pool?

Deep suspicion and overwhelming frustration was expressed in our focus groups. One participant stated plainly: “I see discrimination. I see we can be two people going in the same work, and you know better English...but I work hard more than you...they consider you and they don’t consider me.” Many job seekers felt that they were required to speak English to get through the application process even when English was not essential for the job. Another workforce trainee mentioned a situation of discrimination where he responded to an advertisement in the newspaper; after not hearing from the company for some time he called to check on his application status, at which point he was told the position had been filled. However, he continued to see the advertisement in the newspaper and they continued to promise that they would take it down because the job had been filled. Such situations are exasperating experiences for New Mainers actively seeking jobs in the area.

Another logistical issue is transportation. Many of the jobs offered to Lewiston residents are located significant distances from the Lewiston-Auburn area. One man explained that if he does have a car, he spends almost as much money on gas as he makes in a week. While buses are available as a means of public transport, employees have been

fired due to inconsistencies in the bus schedule. One participant stated that his problem with transportation occurs even before he has been offered a job: “I have trouble because I don’t have transportation to go find the job, to go to the company and ask them for a job.”

Intriguingly, the issue of childcare, or that of accommodating family emergencies, was little mentioned in the Somali focus groups. In fact, our interviewees were adamant that if given the chance they would find a way to get to work and would, moreover, help others get to work regularly, through carpooling and shared child-caring arrangements. When asked about ideal jobs, our interviewees resisted the question, reiterating that their overwhelming desire was to attain a job, any job. In fact, we found the members of our trainee groups hesitant to express anything negative—their exclusive concern was entering the local workforce.

### **Potential Employers’ Perceptions of Barriers to Hiring Somalis**

Echoing the opinion of the job seekers, an overwhelming number of the more than twenty employers interviewed for this study believe that language is the number one barrier. One employer has trouble conducting interviews with non-English speakers because “a lot of interviewing comes from the feeling you get from a person when you are interviewing them...their body language and the way they react to questions and the way that they hesitate... all that stuff and you don’t get that when you are using a translator.” Many of the translators are Somali speakers who may have a grasp of English, but were not necessarily trained in translation. Some employers are skeptical that the information they are trying to get across is being understood: “Determining what an

individual has for skill sets is difficult because... you are relying on a translator to both translate what your words are so they understand it and then what they are saying back to what we understand. I think there is a lot missed in that, trying to get if someone actually knows how to weld through a translator when welding isn't even a word in their country. They have to figure out what a word is that is equivalent."

As we saw, many potential employees complained that they never hear back from employers; however, one staffing agency employer asserts: "We find that if you want to call somebody to place them on an assignment, sometimes it's very difficult to get through to the right person on the other end of the phone and I am assuming again that is the language barrier." We suspect that more than the language barrier is at work, but also varying attitudes toward private property—that is, the presumed sharing of most if not all resources—may also be at work in this particular example of miscommunication.

One company representative explains, inspiringly, that "the most common of our training is hands on...training that happens once they get in the field and that's when the language barriers becomes less of an issue...they figure out how to communicate with one another out there where you don't necessarily have to know English exactly."

Though much labor can be carried out without using the English language, "when it was stuff that we really needed to know that they understood what we were saying, safety, insurance related stuff, we would hire translators to come in and help us with that just because we want to make sure that they understand it." Many companies require a safety test of applicants after they complete the interview process. The safety test must be passed in order for the applicant to move on to any type of orientation. As one manager put it, "the safety is huge." Another employer currently employing Somalis mentioned

that “working with food” can be a safety concern and “heavy equipment that could potentially be dangerous, but that’s the sort of accommodation that we’ve made with the understanding that we need this population in our work force.” Safety regulations are as much of a barrier for employers as it is for employees. Employers are bound by strict regulations enforced by law to ensure the safety of their employees.

American work culture is quite unlike Somali work culture, hence employers face cultural impediments other than language. Such widely held ideas as flexible, spiraling, time, conflict with Mainer’s notions of inflexible, linear, time. Unfortunately, in the Maine context, such conflicting worldviews interfere with immigrant employability. From our employers’ group we learned that “having people show up for appointments or interviews on time is really difficult.” Somali applicants are mightily challenged to accommodate Mainer’s astoundingly rigid sense of time.

Along with the challenge of rigid schedules and linear, discrete, units of time, comes the question of giving notice when taking time off. One staffing agency employer commented: “Once they are employed...they have not been very reliable and I think that that has a lot to do with the communication...they tend to disappear or not show up to work on time and they will say that they have a family emergency and not call us.” This, too, may be attributed to distinctive arrays of cultural value—in this case the supreme emphasis placed upon familial obligations, interfering with Maine employers’ expectations that waged-labor should take priority.

Although minimized by our Somali interviewees, from the point of view of employers this issue was huge. Likewise, religion was passed over as irrelevant by our Somali interviewees, but employers see some aspects as cultural barriers. Most Somalis

may be Muslim, yet it is not often recognized by the wider community that, as with any group, varying levels of religiosity exist amongst Somalis. One employer hiring in the food service industry commented that “we can’t guarantee that someone will not be touching pork...There are some people that are comfortable touching it when they have gloves on. There are some people that are comfortable serving it, but not cleaning dishes that have it, and vice versa. So it’s trying to figure that out. You know, what people can and cannot do, based on their sort of level of dedication to their faith.” Another company explained the problems they faced in terms of dress, specifically women’s headscarves and their wearing long and loose clothing, as this type of clothing poses a safety hazard in certain manufacturing jobs. This company representative acknowledged that some women were willing to wear pants and others were not, however the women who would not wear pants could only be considered for lower paying administrative jobs.

Furthermore, employers divulged facing hard feelings in the wider Lewiston community. One employer believed their biggest challenge “was more the communities’ acceptance and I have had to deal more with the customers who are complaining about having Somalis in the store as opposed to our own associates accepting them...we have to balance that.”

Another company faced intolerance in the workplace between ethnic Somalis and the Somali Bantus working at their side. One employer remarked, “[it] was difficult for us to address the different cultures within the refugee community and how strongly they are for or against one another and we as a company do not condone or tolerate discrimination in any way and it was hard to put two different groups working together

that absolutely hate one another and explain to them that that's not ok in our country and in our company.”

That foreign degrees do not transfer to the United States is as frustrating for employers as for employees. Employers may struggle with the difficult decision to place overly qualified people in production jobs. They struggle, too, with trusting the accuracy of applicants' work histories. Some companies requiring work history and references will nevertheless make exceptions for refugees, understanding that there is no way to verify their resumes. One staffing company representative disclosed: “Regardless of what they have done in their past in their own country...we have placed doctors, teachers, accountants, into production positions here because that is...where the language allows them to be.”

Recall that the complicated routine application process was perceived as a major hurdle by employees. We note here that we learned from the employers' point of view that it eliminates an entire applicant pool. A staffing agency employee says that their “application process is the same regardless of what type of position they are applying for but our application does have a general aptitude test on it, like a math, filing, and coding.” The applicants to this staffing agency are required to fill out the entire application on their own, with no assistance at all, because the agency is bound by their clients' demands: i.e., employees requiring little or no training when placed in a position. Another company requires its applicants to have a CASAS level 9 reading level: “[I] tried to hire them at lower levels...my first groups were six-level and they didn't understand, so we had to increase our standard.” Some employers get around these standardized levels, claiming: “When people come in to apply for a job, I typically talk to them a little

bit more than I would perhaps somebody who does have English as a native language.” Yet other employers argued that using this “judgment system” is only possible for certain kinds of positions. While employers disagree about the effectiveness of standardized testing, those who use it undoubtedly limit their applicant pool, while those who do not must invest extra time during the application process to assess the communication skills of possible employees.

We learned that from both points of view, when standardized language and literacy testing is coupled with a dependence upon electronic technology, the application process is fraught with complications.

### **Our Interviewees’ Suggestions and Best Practices**

From our focus group responses, we were able to glean suggestions for surmounting some of the obstacles recounted in this document.

The hiring process was a major concern for both employers and employees. Both groups suggested replacing online/written applications with oral and visual ones, with, if possible, translators or cultural brokers present. This altered practice will better enable the accurate assessment of an applicant’s abilities and prior work experience.

As we learned, potential Somali employees find it frustrating that formal education requirements can determine whether or not they get placed. One suggestion is a rational reassessment of the requirements. Is a GED truly needed for an entry level placement such as the housekeeping example from our interviews? Is a GED really necessary when an applicant has relevant work experience and the requisite skill?

Where references are required, many employers have begun accepting local teacher recommendations in place of former employer references. Adult Education teachers can easily vouch for the work ethic, character and credibility of their students. These are more easily obtained than, say, a written reference from a former employer in Somalia or Kenya.

Availing yourself of a mediator's support services is another practical suggestion. Employers we interviewed utilized a variety of different kinds of mediators, including translators (trained to relay exactly what one person is saying to another), cultural brokers (they can translate phrases but in addition have a greater understanding of cross-cultural challenges to communication) and caseworkers (those professionally assigned to assist a person or a family may know useful specifics about their lives and circumstances). The Career Center is of assistance to those hiring and also for those job-hunting. Local social service institutions and even charities dedicate precious resources to job-seekers.

One company suggested others should adopt their practice of "conversation partners," where a willing native English speaking colleague is paired with a non-native English speaker. This improved language skills, relieved on-the-job-stress, created friendships, and allowed a sense of community to grow. Most refugees employed full time cannot continue to attend ESOL classes. Conversation partners may provide a good substitute for the oral part of language acquisition. Some employers might also consider on site literacy sessions over and above conversation sessions.

Most employers said they had expected religion to be a major impediment, but found that this is not uniformly or strictly true. Three examples of suggested solutions concerned dress, pork and prayer. Employers should make clear any



good reasons for their dress codes, such as safety issues, but be flexible when the matter is actually one of conventional expectations, style or emotion. An employer in the food industry gave an example of different ways to handle the issue of pork: Some of his employees were fine as long as they used gloves; others would serve pork but not wash contaminated dishes; others avoided it altogether by finding someone else to serve it in their place. The solution to prayer times was given to us by a potential employee: He said he could easily pray during breaks, and to avoid any misconception, he had begun to describe his religious needs in interviews or on the application itself.

For the crucial issue of safety training, we learned of one company, working through the career center, offering free night classes twice a week to give potential employees an opportunity to exhibit their skills as well as to acquire new skills, but meanwhile allowing the employers to easily assess the various participants' potential as safe and competent workers. Another less costly solution was a monthly meeting covering one topic each time, including such issues as safety or workplace policies. The presence of a cultural broker was recommended.

This represents some of the solutions, suggestions, and best practices that came through in our focus groups.

### **Some Benefits of Hiring Somalis**

Despite the current economic downturn, when taking the long[er] view we note that our Lewiston/Auburn area will experience a decline in the available workforce as members of the "baby boomer" generation age-out and retire. Luckily, over 3,500 New

Mainers stand ready to fill those slots. We conclude this report with the five most salient benefits of hiring Somalis we found through our interviews.

First, we point out that the refugees' willingness and desire to work was an overarching theme mentioned by both employers and employees. One employee said, "I'm a hard worker, I'm good at working with other people, when I go to work, I'm on time. Everything I had done was very very good." Employees with whom we spoke tried their best to impress upon us their desire for a job, any job. When asked for their ideal job, they resisted the question and responded again that they wanted a job, any job. They desired jobs in order to support their large globally extended families in this monetized economy. One employer we interviewed said of the Somalis that they are "very concerned with the quality of their work and they are very concerned that they do a good job and that their supervisors are happy with the job that they are doing."

Second, many employers whom we interviewed stressed to us that given the Somalis' desire to work, they will often work whenever they can get a shift, they are willing to be more flexible than those less desperate for waged work. Many Somalis mentioned the desire to have Fridays off, but proclaimed that in exchange for this, they are available to work on weekends. In addition to this, as multiple employers pointed out to us, many Somalis are willing to work on those holidays that other local employees might observe, in exchange for receiving their own holidays off.

The third benefit we found in our study was workplace diversity, which can open up the world, so to speak, for some of the more parochial or naive members of our workforce. This in turn helps knit together the greater community. Some employees that we interviewed mentioned that they had made new friends in their workplaces. Forging

these new connections strengthens the wider social fabric, and increases communication. With increased communication comes recognition by all sides that many of the myths we share about each others' cultures and backgrounds are untrue, and that those cultural differences that are real are tangible, valid and real are nevertheless neither irrational nor insurmountable.

The fourth benefit that we would like to share is that Somali representation in a business may lead to a new or an increased customer base. Some employers stated that hiring Somalis resulted in more Somali customers, as those new Somali customers feel more comfortable in that business because they have a connection with one of its employees. Similarly, a firm reported that after hiring a few Somali employees, they overwhelmingly increased their applicant pool and slowed their turnover rate when their new employees referred their job-seeking friends.

The fifth and final benefit we found important in this discussion was more like a long-term advantage. An employer who was part of our focus groups said: "If you hire someone that genuinely needs a job to feed their family and who has been through an experience that makes them much more appreciative of employment, they will be more committed to you. They will be a more dedicated employee." We think this statement really sums it up: If you are willing to invest in Somali recruits despite an initial language barrier, the chances are they will repay you with long-term dedication and loyalty. These workers are truly a beneficial investment given the aging workforce in south central Maine. Their desire to work and to be successful in their jobs is paired with their desire to impress their employers and provide for their families. They are flexible and add diversity to the workforce which in turn is also beneficial to the cohesion of the

Lewiston/Auburn community. We hope that the employers of this region understand that an initial investment will ultimately yield huge returns for the entire community.

### **Acknowledgements**

The students of Bates College's Fall Semester 2008 Anthropology 339 *Production and Reproduction: Economic Anthropology* are very grateful for the contributions of our [necessarily anonymous, but you know who you are] interviewees, as well as for the support of the Career Center, the Androscoggin Chamber of Commerce, the Harward Center for Community Partnerships, Lewiston Adult Education, and STTAR Consulting.

### **Principle Investigators**

Daisy Hackett '09; Julia Merriman '09

### **Class Participants**

Julia Caffrey; Jamie Cragnoline; Eleanor Down; Rachel Goodermote; Caroline Gottlieb; Grainne Hebler; Kelsey Lamdin; Jean Larmon; Katie Mack; Caitlin McKittrick; Maya Ovrutsky; Kaleigh Pare; Tucker Pawlick; Emma Sprague; Lillian Sullivan

This research is ongoing.  
Suggestions should be addressed to:

Professor Elizabeth A. Eames,  
Chair, Department of Anthropology,  
Bates College,  
Lewiston ME 04240,  
[eeames@bates.edu](mailto:eeames@bates.edu),  
207-786-6082.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of the spring 2008 release of The Maine Department of Labor report on Somali employment patterns in Lewiston-Auburn--a statistical report based upon a limited set of wage data--a large number of community representatives felt the need of additional research. We students enrolled in Bates College's senior seminar in Economic Anthropology were charged with filling in one piece of this puzzle: Examining--first-hand--the perspectives of potential employees and employers concerning perceived barriers to Somali employment. Through holding several focus groups with human resource professionals and others with immigrant job-seekers we came to a better understanding of the full range of impediments to immigrant employment in the Lewiston-Auburn area. We share our insights below and in a full report available from [eeames@bates.edu](mailto:eeames@bates.edu).

### Employees' Perceived Barriers

- The biggest problem potential employees feel they face is the need of English language skills when finding, applying, and maintaining employment.
- Employees found frustration with the GED requirement for employment in entry-level positions. Many had job experience in other American states; however this experience was rendered irrelevant by local employers' GED requirements. They felt that successfully maintaining such jobs did not necessarily require a GED level of formal education.
- Lack of computer skills were another obstacle encountered by the New Mainers. Online applications were a challenge. Moreover, computer literacy is required for job applicants even when the actual job does not require any such skill.
- Many potential job seekers referred to feelings of discrimination when they were not contacted, not hired, or when they were disqualified based on language skills or educational background, despite their abilities to perform the tasks assigned.
- Overall, communication barriers, and the resulting lack of mutual understanding, were the largest concern of the job seekers in our study.

### Employers' Perceived Barriers

- Employers expressed similar concerns regarding communication. Evaluating potential employees was difficult when information seems to get lost in translation. They expressed having difficulty reading body language and emotional reaction in interviewees.
- After hiring Somali employees, it is seen to be a challenge to convey employment policies and procedures. Safety issues have been one of the biggest concerns expressed in our study.
- Cultural differences appear to pose obstacles to employers in the areas of timeliness, clothing, and certain religious practices. Some learned not to assume homogeneity among the immigrant population, noting that Somalis display a range of religious expression, modes of dress, and punctuality.
- Tension between African immigrant and other employees, as well as that between ethnic Somalis and Somali Bantu refugees, was cited as a disincentive to émigré employment.

### Best Practices and Further Suggestions

- Mediators such as the Adult Learning Center, the Career Center and Catholic Charities have been essential in facilitating the employment process.
- Both employers and employees recommend multiplying the types of acceptable application procedures and prerequisites. This includes demonstrating one's ability through pictures, using trained translators, and revising hiring requirements for the GED, English language skills, or computer literacy. Accepting prior work experience as evidence of employability, and accepting alternative forms of recommendations, could assist in this effort.
- Examples of successful training programs included hands-on sessions, online courses, and establishing conversation partners on site.
- Using well-trained cultural brokers to assist in safety, policy, employment rights, and diversity awareness workshops was highly recommended.

### Benefits

As a large percentage of Maine's workforce will approach retirement age in the next few years, recent Somali immigrants potentially could fill our employment gap. Moreover, as ten percent of our population, we need to employ members of this group, they need the wages, are willing to work hard at entry level positions, will bring diversity to our workplaces, will work flexible hours, can broaden our customer base as well as our employment pool, and will prove to be loyal employees committed to their employers.

### Principle Investigators:

Elizabeth Eames, Daisy Hackett and Julia Merriman

### Class Participants:

Julia Caffrey, Jamie Cragnoline, Eleanor Down, Rachel Goodermote, Caroline Gottlieb, Grainne Hebler, Kelsey Lamdin, Jean Larmon, Katie Mack, Caitlin McKitrick, Maya Ovrutsky, Kaleigh Pare, Tucker Pawlick, Emma Sprague, Lillian Sullivan

## APPENDIX

### IN THE WAKE OF THE MDOL REPORT WHAT REMAINS FOR US TO UNCOVER?

1. Nature and quality of the available statistics restrict what questions may be asked and what methodologies could be utilized.
2. Descriptive statistics are very useful, but cannot provide explanations or causal arguments.
3. It should be made very clear who could NOT be counted in the MDOL statistics (e.g., those who do not go through the general assistance office, those in informal employment, those self-employed or employed entirely within the Somali community).
4. Data on linguistic attainment is not presented, yet a low level of achievement is presumed. Moreover, it is used as an explanation of low employment rates despite the absence of data.
5. Ditto for formal education.
6. Ditto for skills.
7. If we take holism seriously, we must note, and consider filling, in the absence of Lewiston in this study. What is Lewiston's historical context? Social context? What is the overall employment rate in Lewiston now? What competition for entry level jobs is there or is thought to be there between New Mainers and Lewiston locals?
8. The possibility of employment discrimination is left unaddressed. While speculation about language and education and religion as pull factors is discussed, virtually no push factors are addressed.
9. What skills are *truly* necessary for any particular job and might the posted pre-requisites at times really be a hidden form of discrimination?
10. Only 6% use the Career Center's services. This begs for an explanation.
11. Which sectors employ most of the Somalis? Why?
12. Heterogeneity of the group is not visible. No distinction is made between various population segments, such as distinct ethnic origins (or if one wants to address it, the more fine-grained divisions of clan affiliation), rural or urban experience, class distinctions, formal employment history, and most interesting in being left out, gender distinctions in expectations and outcomes are left unaddressed.
13. We need more evidence about whether any workforce/skills training received is appropriate and whether refugee employees become more stable-y employed after such training or not?
14. We should gather information on best practices, such as onsite training using visual methods, support for daycare, carpooling/transportation, provision of interpreters on regular occasions if not at all times, flextime or part time employment, ESOL/ELL training on site, prayer breaks, family emergency days, etc..
15. We need evidence about the real and perceived barriers to employment, such as transportation, childcare, formal credentials, quality of interpretation services, cultural brokers' skill levels, etc.
16. The language of the report—"cultural barriers"—is extremely vague. Culture was absent from the data set used, but more grounded information on cultural differences would seem to be necessary and significant.
17. We should learn something of the various economic contexts/employment contexts in their homeland of Somalia as well as in their more recent location of the refugee camps in Kenya.
18. What is the meaning of wage labor for Somali refugees? What is formal employment actually good for? What, if any, role do religion or spiritual beliefs play in the evaluation of the meaning of work? Is there any stigma associated with particular activities?
19. Distinct notions of time and timeliness in Northeast US and East African workplace cultures would appear to be a major cross cultural stressor. What are some others?
20. What is the human/cultural dimension of the enforced individuation of formal waged employment?