

City of Camden, AR

Arkansas Environmental Training Academy

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Targeted Community

Camden is a small southern town with a population of around 13,000 residents, of which 56 percent are African American and 22 percent are below poverty level. In order to expand their reach, the EWDJT program recruits statewide with a particular focus on those residents within 50 miles and able to commute to Camden four nights a week for 19 weeks. Fortunately, employers eager to work with and hire program graduates reside within the targeted community. It is important for programs in rural communities to adapt recruitment, delivery, and placement methods that work for the residents and for employers.

Background

The city of Camden and the Arkansas Environmental Training Academy (AETA) is a collaboration of state, city, and educational organizations, each providing support and guidance to the EWDJT program. The AETA is the designated Environmental Training Center for the state of Arkansas and is a training division of Southern Arkansas University Tech in Camden, Arkansas. The AETA is made up of five divisions:

1. Water
2. Wastewater
3. Backflow Prevention
4. Solid Waste Management
5. Environmental Health & Safety

The Academy has a statewide mission to provide quality training and educational programs to aid the management and operating staff of municipal, commercial, and industrial facilities in meeting state and federal licensing and certification requirements. With this background, it was a natural step to provide environmental training to the unemployed and underserved residents of the community.

Funding Sources and Resources

- Arkansas State Legislature
- Arkansas Department of Higher Education
- Arkansas Department of Pollution Control & Ecology
- Arkansas Department of Health
- Industrial contracts

- Grants
- Student registration fees (not associated with the EWDJT program)

Key Partners

- Arkansas State Legislature
- Arkansas Department of Higher Education
- Southern Arkansas University Tech
- Municipal solid waste, water, and wastewater facilities
- Economic Development Council
- Arkansas workforce development centers
- Statewide and national employers and employment agencies

Program Challenges

The primary concern during the development of the program was finding a way for local residents, some who may have part-time employment, to attend and complete the training program. The road to “now” has been a learning experience.

Path to EWDJT for Community Residents

- 1967—Southwest Technical Institute was created by the Arkansas General Assembly.
- 1980’s—Established the Arkansas Environmental Academy with funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency. Partnered with the Arkansas Department of Pollution Control & Ecology to begin a training program for the licensing of solid waste operators statewide.
- 1991—Partnered with the Arkansas Department of Health to begin training backflow prevention and cross-connection control technicians statewide.
- 2006—Established the Environmental Health & Safety program to provide a cost effective means for municipal and industrial facilities statewide to obtain affordable safety training for their employees.
- 2007—Applied for and received the first EPA EWDJT grant.
- 2009—Re-competed and awarded a second EPA EWDJT grant. Through an act of legislation, SAU Tech Environment Control Center officially became the Arkansas Environmental Training Academy. The Academy constructed a 6,000 sq. ft. Environmental Training Lab.
- 2012—Re-competed and awarded a third EPA EWDJT grant.
- 2014—Re-competed and awarded its current EPA EWDJT grant.

Core Training Program

- 40-hour HAZWOPER, OSHA 29 CFR 1910.120
- 19 certifications
- 3 national training cards
- 4 state licenses
- A full complement of solid waste, water, and wastewater operations
- Articulation agreements with Southern Arkansas educational system for college credit

Student Recruitment

In rural communities such as Alaska, Nye County, tribal communities, and Camden Arkansas, student recruitment becomes the primary impediment to running a successful program.

AETA started with the traditional recruitment methodologies but found that program scheduling was their answer to successful recruitment. Their experiences are described below.

Training Delivery, Services, and Retention—The secret to rural success

Early training cycles followed the traditional EWDJT training schedule—daytime classes 8:00 AM–4:00 PM weekdays. Recruitment was extremely difficult. The first cycle recruited and graduated only 6 participants.

The following cycle, the EWDJT program asked for and received permission to provide core courses via the Internet with 2 nights per week for lab and face-to-face sessions. Applications jumped from 6 to over 30. Recruitment was excellent but delivery did not prove as effective. Students were unprepared and not disciplined for distance learning. Internet training can be an effective tool, but it is limited when it comes to environmental technology.

As the learning process continued, a new revision to delivery methodology was requested shifting program delivery to night classes. Night classes from 5–9 PM four days a week for 19 weeks has demonstrated to be an excellent delivery method for rural communities such as those in Camden, Arkansas. Applications jumped to 50 with an excellent selection of candidates. Evening classes in rural areas allow students to commute to class and participate in day work, when available. Student instruction allows for closer relationships with students and removes impediments associated with Internet distance learning.

Graduate Placement

Graduates receive a program diploma and 19 individual course certifications. Placement has not been an issue for AETA. As word has spread, local employers visit and advise the program. The result is a placement rate exceeding 80 percent.

Summary Notes

Environmental workforce development in rural and disbursed communities is difficult but not impossible. Student populations are lower than in urban communities but with 80%+ placement rate, AETA has discovered ways to make it work.

AETA advice

- Be flexible
- If your current program is not working, seek guidance from students and employers.
- Do not be afraid of changing curriculum, recruitment, or delivery methods.
- Jobs are dynamic—there are only so many treatment plant openings.

- Follow employer recommendations.
- Stay close to your partners, advisors, and students.
- Be a cheerleader.
- Make graduation and EWDJT events a big deal for students, parents, and friends.
- Your students may graduate but are always are part of the program.