

Grant allows environmental job training at FSCJ, with emphasis on veterans

FSCJ environmental program has created possibilities for new careers.

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WILL DICKEY/The Times-Union

Students learn to decontaminate responders to a hazardous materials spill at Florida State College at Jacksonville's downtown campus Tuesday. The Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training class is free and funded by an EPA grant.

By [William Browning](#)

In 2007 Danny Cummings moved back to Jacksonville, his native city, to help care for his ailing parents.

He had spent two decades plus in the Marines and was working as a Ruby Tuesdays regional manager in Atlanta when he made the move. Back on the First Coast, though, he struggled.

“To be honest with you, there weren’t a lot of good-paying jobs,” he said.

Cummings, 48, bounced from one temporary job to the next. Each change chipped away at his confidence. Then in 2009, through a job-placement agency, he heard about a new program at Florida State College at Jacksonville offering free training for people interested in environmental work.

He applied for a slot in the eight-week course and was accepted.

“I was just blown away with the passion,” he said. “The passion for helping veterans, for helping anybody.”

Cummings completed the course and landed a job helping clean up the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. After three months working in Mobile and Pensacola, he came home with \$15,000 in his pocket. But more importantly, he said, he came back with a renewed sense of self-worth.

“We’re not just here because it’s something to do,” he said of people who go through the U.S. EPA Environmental Workforce Development & Job Training Program course at FSCJ. “You’re here for a reason, to improve our environment. But people are also given a chance to improve themselves and become empowered.”

Cummings was in the program’s second class. This summer, the 11th and 12th classes are under way with 32 total students. They are broken into two groups: one of military veterans, one of non-military citizens.

The program is funded through a two-year, \$300,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. Partnering with the Wounded Warrior Project, it targets military veterans. But anyone who is from Duval County and unemployed or under-employed, or working less than 20 hours a week, can apply.

Applicants go through a formal interview process, drug screening, background check and must pass an adult basic education test. Pamela Scherer, the program’s general manager, said she and her staff focus on choosing applicants who show a genuine desire to work. Most students are in their 40s.

Since the program began in 2010, 79 percent of students who have completed the course have landed a job, according to Scherer.

“It helps with our local economy,” she said. “It helps them and their families to boost their own lives ... this is opening the doors of opportunity for a lot of people. It’s changing the mindset of some of the urban core community here.”

The program takes place at the college’s Urban Resource Center on West State Street. The classes, taught by nine instructors, are treated like a full-time job: eight hours a day, five days a week. By the time students are finished, they have completed course work involving OSHA safety training, first aid and CPR training, emergency responder training and environmental science and math training.

The certifications students earn would cost roughly \$4,000 if a person got them on their own, Scherer said.

Aside from the job training, the program allows people who otherwise would never set foot on a college campus a chance to better themselves and see what’s available, said Fred Culvyhouse, the director of Staff, Student and Veterans Services at FSCJ.

“It’s changing lives,” he said. “Of all the programs at the college, there is no program more effective, I think, that touches students and gives them jobs — and touches the most needy students.”

James Hamilton, 31, is a current student. He has spent his working life in what he called “entry-level” jobs in customer service. Looking to build a career that allows him to travel, he applied to the program and was accepted. The atmosphere, he said, has pushed him to focus.

“It’s not a lot of riff-raff,” he said of the students. “Everybody who is here, is determined.”

Brandon Keel, 28, is another student. He learned about the program through the Wounded Warrior Project. Keel got out of the Army after three years in 2007. Since then, he has been laid off twice, most recently in February. He sees the program as a springboard into a growing industry that allows him to help the environment.

Cummings, who now works as an adjunct instructor in the program, said he encourages the students to form networking bonds through their classes to help them land jobs.

“Every day I come in and I know what they’re here for,” he said. “I know what they’re trying to do.”

The next class begins in January. Duval County residents interested in applying can go to mpss.fscj.edu/iosh/us-epa-ewdjt/index.php or email Sarah Ashbrook at sashbroo@fscj.edu.

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Read more at Jacksonville.com: <http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2012-07-25/story/grant-allows-environmental-job-training-fscj-emphasis-veterans#ixzz22DJ94Ox7>