

CONNECT News

Community Support, Networking, and Assistance for Environmental Career Training

March/April 2019

The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) with a cooperative agreement from the US Environmental Protection Agency provides technical assistance to communities interested in developing and delivering environmental job training. "CONNECT" is HMTRI's acronym for Community support, networking, and assistance for environmental career training. Each bimonthly e-publication features topics of interest to organizations delivering environmental remediation training. This issue discusses best practices used by successful grantees to find program participants who are motivated, capable and most likely to succeed in a new environmental career.

Best Practices

Student Recruitment, Screening, and Assessment

EWDJT programs succeed or fail based on the quality of their graduates

As part of this series of CONNECT newsletters, HMTRI has identified eight critical issues that must be addressed for EWDJT programs to be successful.

1. Community and labor market assessment
2. Building partnerships
3. Leveraging for additional support
4. Student recruitment, screening, and assessment
5. Curriculum development
6. Life skills, remedial training, support services, and student retention
7. Placement and tracking
8. Program sustainability

The January/February CONNECT newsletter addressed the first two issues -- community/labor market assessments and partnership development – and presented best practices used by successful grantees. This issue, we are

examining student recruitment, screening, and assessment.

Here's a mantra all EWDJT program managers should keep in mind.

"Our mission is to find train and place motivated community residents in meaningful, sustainable, environmental jobs"

All other EWDJT activities provide means for achieving this primary goal. Student recruitment, screening, and assessment have a direct relationship to placement and, along with placement, represent the most important issues facing the success of EWDJT programs. You may be asking yourself the following questions:

- How do we find the most deserving community residents?
- How do we recruit them into the EWDJT program?

- How can we increase the likelihood they will complete the program?
- How do we maximize the graduate placement rate?

Answers to these questions are not always clear or certain, but there are best practices HMTRI has identified that help increase the odds EWDJT programs will be successful. Over the years, we have found the most common reason EWDJT programs fail is a lack of attention paid to student recruitment, screening, and assessment.

Student Recruitment

Simply put, student recruitment means finding motivated community residents interested in developing a new career through an EWDJT program. Environmental technology, especially environmental remediation technology, is still relatively new. There are many misconceptions and misunderstandings about this nontraditional occupation. The first impression most people have are workers walking around dressed in protective “moon suits.” Danger, fire, and hazardous materials that can kill are all words an inner-city resident might associate with environmental technicians. The first step in student recruitment is awareness and education about environmental occupations.

When recruitment seems to be down, more effort may need to be placed on the benefits and rewards of environmental careers. Program managers cannot assume community residents or even career recruiters and councilors are familiar with environmental technology activities, which can encompass a wide range. Occupational offerings also vary among EWDJT programs. When discussing environmental job opportunities, careers need to be tailored to the training being provided locally. Student awareness addresses the advantages, activities, and benefits associated

with an environmental career. EWDJT graduates need to understand what they can expect upon completion of the program. Established programs have an advantage: prior graduates, word of mouth, and a track record that provide testimony about the program. Many successful programs suggest word of mouth as their best recruitment strategy. This fact is evidenced by oversubscribed applicant cohorts filled with relatives, friends, and referrals following the first graduation class.

First year grantees and especially grantees located in rural communities face a more daunting education and awareness effort. Communities having a smaller pool of prospective applicants need to redouble their outreach effort. Tribal and rural EWDJT programs are among the most challenging. When target communities are small, program managers need to consider expanding their reach and plan for student cohorts with larger disparities in age, experience, and education. The primary objective of early student recruitment is to expand the number of applicants as much as possible. Here are some techniques EWDJT grantees have used to convince potential applicants to consider an environmental career.

Best Practices used to expand applicant interest:

- Provide examples of environmental technician careers.
- Emphasize EWDJT is for a career – not just a job.
- Use social media including websites, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook to illustrate environmental technicians at work.
- Don't forget videos, press releases, radio, and television spots.
- Take advantage of neighborhood orientations, presentations, and job fairs.

- Engage EWDJT graduates and employers as recruiters.
- Make extensive use of community and faith based organizations for program awareness and promotion.
- Seek confirmation of resident support for participating in an environmental training program.
- Keep in close contact with job centers and provide support materials as requested.
- Establish as many orientation nights as possible to expand the applicant pool.

Student Screening

The objective of student screening is to funnel the largest pool of applicants available to a class of 20-25 motivated and likely to succeed participants.

Nothing kills an environmental training program faster than poor graduate placement. Successful placement is highly dependent on the quality of program graduates, which is dependent on students selected for training.

Student selection has a direct impact on the quality of graduates. The quality of graduates has shown to reflect on the reputation of the entire program and the ability to place future graduates. Perhaps the most common reason why EWDJT programs fail is an inability to screen applicants most likely to complete the program and find employment. While rejecting deserving applicants may appear cruel, every poor choice results in a wasted seat that could have been occupied by another deserving and potentially successful candidate.

Establishing screening protocols

EPA guidelines say little about applicant screening. Grantees are free to target special groups including ex-offenders, disabled workers, and special populations as long as

they are chronically unemployed or under-employed. With little guidance, applicant screening is determined on a program-by-program basis. Screening protocol may be as simple as “first come- first serve” or as extensive as minimum verbal and math skills with pre-training try-outs. When minimum skill and knowledge standards are used, such as a high school diploma or GED, students may need developmental education as a supplement to the EWDJT program.

Often, employers play a large role in setting screening protocols. Most, but not all, employers expect workers to be drug free. In some cases, ex-offenders are not employable for security concerns. Physical impairments may exclude workers requiring mobility or use of respirators. Teamwork and trust are essential elements contributing to graduate employability.

Issues that influence screening protocols:

- Size of the applicant pool
- Difficulty and nature of the curriculum
- Classroom disparities such as age, education, experience, culture, and language
- Physical requirements associated with training
- Openings available for training
- Ability to attend training and associated events
- Types of jobs available
- Employer needs and restrictions

Each EWDJT grantee needs to establish an applicant screening protocol. That process needs to be provided to potential applicants in early orientation events. While each program may be different, successful grantees usually recruit students with these attributes:

- Determination and ability needed to stick with the program
- Works well in groups

- Ability and motivation to attend all classes
- Accepts new and difficult challenges
- Capable of completing academic and physical requirements of employment
- Passionate for their new career
- Will appeal to potential employers

Over the years, grantees have used a variety of screening tools that include objective and subjective applicant screens used in combination. The techniques listed below illustrate some of the tools used by EWDJT grantees:

- Drug testing
- Physical ability tests
- Open house, orientations, and working sessions
- Try-outs
- Pre-training (for example, life skills or construction trades not related to environmental training with the best and most motivated students offered advanced environmental training opportunities)
- One-on-one and group interviews
- Family visits

Drug screening protocols

Drug screening varies greatly from program to program. While not mandatory, most employers will not hire graduates who do not agree to take drug-screening tests. Make clear at orientation, independent of the testing policy, that students must remain drug-free throughout the program. Some programs require a drug test prior to program entry. Others require a drug test as a condition for graduation. When applicants are not required to take drug tests, make it perfectly clear that employers working with hazardous materials have zero tolerance for drug use. Drug tests may be required as part of pre-employment screening or may be conducted randomly by

employers, especially for employees who handle or transport hazardous materials. Keep in mind that employers may be hesitant to hire future graduates if they feel the program has a lax drug policy.

For the majority of workplace drug tests, a five-panel drug screen is used. In fact, this is the standard for [Federal Mandatory Guidelines for Workplace Drug Testing](#). The Department of Transportation (DOT) also uses five-panel urine drug tests. DOT truck drivers are required to undergo a drug test prior to employment, at least once randomly per year, after most accidents, and if reasonable suspicion exists that a driver is abusing drugs. The five-panel test screens for the following drugs:

- Cocaine
- Amphetamine/Methamphetamine
- Opiates such as heroin, codeine, and morphine
- Phencyclidine or PCP
- THC (marijuana)

Some EWDJT programs have moved to a more rigorous testing guideline. The ten-panel test includes the following drugs:

- Cocaine
- Amphetamine/Methamphetamine
- Opiates such as heroin, codeine, and morphine
- Phencyclidine or PCP
- THC (marijuana)
- Propoxyphene
- Methadone
- Barbiturates
- Benzodiazepines

Often the question arises regarding costs associated with drug testing. Many EWDJT programs have been successful in negotiating with public health agencies for the administration of applicant drug tests. Explore

a number of possibilities including labor, health, and social service agencies in pursuing drug screening assistance.

Physical screening protocols

Applicants should only be screened based on physical attributes when alternative non-physical training is not available. Programs concentrating on Phase I assessment do not require physical attributes. Many other environmental occupations, including data management, communications, recordkeeping, report writing, and sample analysis, are completed in an office or lab, requiring clerical and cognitive skills with minimal physical activity. Many EWDJT programs accept disabled workers by providing a multi-track individual learning plan. When individualized training is not available, applicant screening may involve minimal physical abilities. Physical attributes may be used as an applicant screen under the following conditions:

- Equipment handlers may need to move equipment between various locations.
- Physical strength and ladder climbing ability are necessary in specific occupations.
- Small, underground or dark places including tanks must be inspected and cleaned.
- Confined space entry is a key component of many EWDJT programs. For example, hazardous materials workers and inspectors must enter confined spaces.
- Asbestos and lead workers perform activities with their arms elevated for long periods while wearing protective clothing.
- Before wearing a self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), a complete physical examination is

required as breathing can be difficult in this protective gear.

- Workers may need to operate in hot and/or cold spaces.

Subjective screening protocols

Objective tools are only a part of the screening protocol needed to select participants with the best chance of completing the environmental training program and finding employment. Grantees acknowledge that student assessment tests do not provide the most important indicators of successful candidates. Subjective screening addresses several applicant attributes including the following:

- Sticking with the program
- Being determined
- Having a positive attitude
- Working well in groups
- Attending all classes
- Accepting new and difficult challenges
- Having a passion for a new career
- Appealing to potential employers

In addition to face-to-face informal interviews, program staff often present challenges to potential applicants. Challenges may include multiple mandatory orientation meetings, expanded application forms, and awareness training. Other selection processes include job tryouts, family interviews, or life skills training.

The tryout process is a popular screening tool with many grantees. Tryouts place applicants in a series of team building exercises. Tryouts have demonstrated to be an effective approach in finding participants most likely to work well in groups, demonstrate an ability to accept challenges, and complete difficult tasks.

Use of pre-training as a screening tool has also proven effective with organizations that offer other services such as construction skills training. For example, Youth Build programs

are able to provide construction skills training and offer EWDJT as an added skill set to motivated participants. Pre-training provides instructors and staff an opportunity to observe potential participants in a training environment. In cases where supplemental occupational training does not exist, EWDJT grantees can provide pre-training with unsupported life skills and remedial education instruction.

Subjective screening using interviews remain the most popular tool for gauging applicant interest and attitude. Face-to-face, group, or phone interviews are best completed by EWDJT program staff including trainers and, when possible, employer advisors. Initially, phone interviews are a good start when the applicant pool is large. As the pool of prospective applicants is reduced, face-to-face interviews provide better insight into the applicant's personality. The best selection tool involves additional interviews with friends and family.

Best practices for applicant screening

- A formal applicant screening protocol should be established and made clear as part of applicant orientation.
- Drug testing as an applicant screen is optional. When drug testing is not part of screening protocol, students must be informed of federal and employer drug policies.
- Physical screens should only be used when alternative training is not available.
- Criminal history should not be used as an applicant screen unless job opportunities are restricted.
- Conduct face-to-face interviews as a final applicant screen.
- When possible, interview friends and family regarding the applicant's interest in starting a new and challenging environmental career.

- Do not rush to finalize applicant selection.
- Work closely with employers. Seek out their workforce needs.
- Establish protocols that will deliver graduates requested by employers.
- The quality of your graduates will reflect the quality of your program.
- Remember – every dropout is a wasted seat that a deserving student could have occupied.

Student Assessment

The purpose of a skills and knowledge assessment is to establish an applicant's ability to complete the academic rigors of training and employment. The second objective is to establish a knowledge baseline for each student and, if applicable, develop a training/education plan that will result in successful job training and employment.

In most cases, the local Job Center/Workforce Investment Board will administer skills and knowledge assessment evaluations. However, as part of the application/screening process, it is important that EWDJT program staff be involved in skills and knowledge assessments. When possible, program staff maintains a close working relationship with those administering the tests. Student assessments also provide instructors with guidance on the complexity and grade level at which they train.

Minimum entrance requirements vary from program to program. Some require high school diplomas. Others require a General Educational Development (GED) diploma. Assessment instruments can establish metrics like academic strengths and weaknesses, with a few words of caution. Do not expect ANY test to measure a trait or ability with perfect accuracy for every single person. Do not expect

ANY test or procedure to be completely accurate in predicting performance. Assessment tests will not provide assurance that students will stick with the program when challenges arise.

The Three Most Commonly-Used Verbal, Math, and Reading Tests Administered to Program Participants

1. Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE)

TABE scores are correlated to GED scores and are often used with the Department of Labor Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. The TABE assessment measures basic skills in reading, math, and language. It is widely used in vocational programs, welfare to work, and military advancement programs. Several EPA grantees use the test for screening. Grantees using TABE have a range of acceptance criteria. More rural and populations with diversity may use 6-8th grade, while populations with large numbers of applicants may use as high as 8-10th grade level for advancement in the screening process. As a generalization, the more applicants screened, the higher the acceptance standards become.

2. Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS)

CASAS assesses adult basic reading, math, listening, writing, and speaking skills. It has been approved and validated by the US Department of Education and Department of Labor, both for native and nonnative speakers. As with the NCRC and WorkKeys programs, the CASAS system can provide a workforce skills certificate.

3. WorkKeys

WorkKeys was developed by ACT (creators of the Assessment College Entrance Exam). It is EEO compliant and includes reading for information, applied mathematics, and locating information. Each test requires about

40 minutes. WorkKeys can be tied to a National Career Readiness certificate (NCRC) which can be used as a placement tool. EPA grantees have indicated that of the four levels (platinum, gold, silver, and bronze) they find that the Silver National Career Readiness Certificate is asked for by employers.

Each of these assessment tools have been used by EWDJT grantees. In some cases, none of these assessments has been incorporated into the screening process. When no objective tests are administered, high school diplomas or General Educational Development (GED) diplomas are accepted.

In most cases, when local job centers administer math and verbal assessments, they select the evaluation tool. The three tests just discussed -- TABE, CASAS, and WorkKeys -- are the most popular assessment tools used by EWDJT grantees. Again, the specific tool used depends on the approach recognized locally by other agencies and employers.

Best practices for student assessment

- The assessment test employed will likely be determined and administered by the local job center.
- Assessment tests gauge reading and basic math aptitude and work well to identify those with learning issues that prevent training success.
- Assessment tests should be used by instructors as a guide in delivering training.
- Assessment tests do not assess subjective attributes necessary for completion of EWDJT.

For those not chosen to participate in EWDJT

As previously noted, EWDJT grantees have used a variety of screening and assessment tools. In some cases, screening may yield more qualified applicants than available seats. In

these situations, waiting lists have been created to replace early dropouts. Outstanding applicants have been encouraged to wait for the next cohort. In any case, staff should become familiar with alternative training opportunities that may be a better fit for applicants not accepted into the EWDJT program.

Depending on local demographics, employer needs, leveraged partners, curriculum, and target applicant population, the approach selected hopefully will produce a cohort with motivated, capable, and employable graduates.

Join Our Listserv

HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges and has provided environmental workforce development technical assistance since the inception of EPA's Brownfields Initiative.

For more information on HMTRI technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact Heather Ballou at hkballou@eicc.edu.



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