

CONNECT News

Community Supp**O**rt, **N**etworking, and Assista**N**ce
 for **E**nvironmental **C**areer **T**raining
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The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) with a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assists communities establish environmental job training programs. To better exchange ideas, HMTRI distributes CONNECT, a bimonthly e-publication, featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA Brownfields Environmental Job Training (BJT) grant program. Ideas presented do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. This month's issue discusses the importance of community engagement, student recruitment, and selection in the successful execution of a Brownfields Job Training Program.

Community Engagement, Student Recruitment and Selection

As BJT grant recipients prepare their next training cohort, three activities stand out as the largest contributors to successful or failed BJT programs.

- Community engagement
- Student awareness and recruitment
- Applicant screening, assessment, and selection

The activities just presented have been discussed as part of the HMTRI Professional Learning Community (PLC) and as breakout topics at the BJT Mid-Year Professional Development Refresher on October 12th. They represent critical issues facing BJT grantees at this point in the grant cycle. This month's CONNECT issue presents best practices used by successful grantees supplementing information presented at the Professional Learning Community and the Mid-Year Professional Development Refresher.

Engaging Community Stakeholders

As part of the BJT application, organizations must select a target community where the program intends to focus their attention. Community assessments are used to determine which communities would be best served by an environmental job training program. Using a combination of assessment tools including

EJscreen, census data, and consultation with government, community and brownfields organizations, a target community is identified as part of the grant application. At this point, efforts have been primarily a paper and networking exercise. Often missing, is the most important aspect of community selection. "Build it and they will come" is not an acceptable approach to choosing a successful target community. The missing effort requires boots on the ground -- which we refer to as community engagement.

Engaging the target community is an activity that insures the BJT program will be welcomed by community residents and that they will participate in the program. Community engagement and awareness confirms that employers and governmental organizations are on board with the training location. It also insures that BJT will not conflict with other neighborhood development programs. Community engagement and awareness identifies pathways to potential stakeholders, leveraging partners, and local employers. Community engagement is a marketing, networking, education, and communication effort. It needs to be conducted early with

other community and labor market assessments and certainly before recruitment efforts begin. If the proposed BJT program is not enthusiastically embraced by local residents, the target community must be reconsidered.

Community engagement strategies

Selling BJT to government interests, community groups, influencers, service providers and employers early in the planning process is essential. Creating enthusiasm early provides many benefits during start up phases of the grant, especially if stakeholders have actively participated in grant development.

Stakeholders include individuals, organizations, and officials interested in supporting or participating in the training program. Below are the first steps in community engagement which should be taken as part of application development.

- Visit city offices. Request contact information and introductions to applicable divisions including an introduction to City Council members in target communities.
- In the offices of community and economic development, seek contact information and introduction to community groups, organizers, and faith-based organizations in the selected target community.
- Community organizations need to participate grant development. In the proposed target community, visit religious and civic organizations, again seeking contact information for possible links to stakeholders and partners.
- Identify community groups, church, and religious affiliated organizations, fraternal and community nonprofit organizations and local Chambers of Commerce willing to help in student awareness, recruitment, and placement.

- Identify local training and student support services that can leverage existing resources. Workforce Investment Boards and affiliates, Goodwill, Salvation Army, Youth Build, Strive, Conservation Corps are examples of organizations active in underserved neighborhoods.
- Engage the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) as part of the application development process.

Engaging governmental organizations

Key in community engagement is inclusion of city offices and support services in grant development. Organizations should be revisited when grant awards have been made and need to be on board well before BJT program student recruitment begins. Governmental entities that should be kept informed include the following offices.

- Office of Economic Development
- Health and Environment
- Community Development
- Brownfields
- Health and Human Services
- Labor and Workforce Development (WIBs and One-Stops)
- City Purchasing and Procurement
- City Council representatives (especially in the target community.)

Benefits of an engaged community

It is surprising that in many BJT communities, local support services are not aware of the program, mission, or contribution to the neighborhood. Development of a community stakeholder list can be large and as previously noted and should be part of the application process and continue through the implementation of the grant. Stakeholders include nongovernmental organizations, community influencers and religious organizations.

- Stakeholders should remain informed of program developments and are

encouraged to contribute as the grant is written.

- Engaged stakeholders can provide resources and support as the program develops. Detailed community information and history, not widely available, can be provided by the local WIB, neighborhood government, and community organizations.
- In addition to letters of support, partnerships and leveraging opportunities, engaged community stakeholders will identify with, and promote the program as it matures.
- Engaged stakeholders provide networking opportunities outside the community enhancing leveraging opportunities.

Student Awareness and Recruitment

Successful student recruitment is based on transparency and detailed communication regarding expectations of both the student and BJT. Here are issues that should be covered when recruiting prospective applicants.

- What is an Environmental Technician?
- Are there Jobs for environmental technicians?
- What are the costs and benefits associated with Brownfields Job Training?
- Requirements to enter the program.
- What is the application process?
- How are applicants selected?
- What can participants expect after being selected for training?
- How long before graduation and what are the dates and duration of training?
- What is expected of accepted applicants.

What is an Environmental Technician?

In basic general terms, a description of environmental technician needs to be provided (as related to the certifications and training

provided). Photos and videos are one of the best descriptors BJT graduates perform. YouTube and website links are another excellent source.

Are there Jobs for environmental technicians?

The best answer to this question is reinforced by testimonials or videos from prior graduates. Information from the local Workforce Investment Board or “One stop” can be presented, but more convincing presentations included copies of local Google searches posting job openings for environmental technicians. Postings include organizations seeking workers, employment requirements and position descriptions.

What are the costs and benefits associated with Brownfields Job Training?

Brownfield Job Training program costs and benefits need to be explained to potential applicants early in the recruitment process.

- Who supports the training program?
- What does it cost?
- Why does the program exist?
- How does the program contribute to the community?
- What are the expectations from the students?
- What can participants expect from the program?
- Who should and shouldn't apply?

Requirements to enter the program.

EPA does not require drug testing as an entry requirement for BJT and policies vary widely among grantees. It should be emphasized, however, that employers are likely to test, and it is highly likely to become a condition of employment. Here are EPA's conditions for entry into the BJT.

- At least 18 years old (Also a requirement for HAZWOPER training).
- Able to attend and complete training.
- Depending on the curriculum, specific physical attributes may be required. (Example, a fit test requirement for HAZWOPER).

- Be unemployed, underemployed, or low income.
- Be a us citizen or legal resident.

What does the application process look like?

- Candidates are asked to complete a basic online or paper application and provide proper documentation.
- Routine background and recommendations are reviewed.
- Applicants must attend a BJT orientation (some grantees may have a single or multiple orientation sessions). Orientations provide examples of environmental technician careers and most important, the ability to train for a career.
- Following initial applications and orientation, prospective applicants may need to provide additional information and discuss the training program in more detail.
- Participants are invited to the training facility for a tour and in-person interview. Occasionally program staff will meet with applicant families and invite applicants to participate in group activities.
- Individuals should demonstrate to program staff they are interested in an environmental career... not just a job.
- A personal acceptance or rejection into the program will be made in person, by phone or email.
- Accepted participants will be instructed to take a student assessment tests (Math, Literacy, physical to be discussed in more detail later in this newsletter).

How are applicants selected?

- As with entry requirements, the selection process for prospective participants varies widely among BJT grantees.

- The number of applicants selected for consideration range from 15 to as many as 30 (allowing for attrition).
- When a cohort fills early, applicants are encouraged to apply for the next cohort or be put on a “wait list in case openings become available.
- Pre-training such as life skills or construction trades not related to environmental training may be offered first. Participants motivated and interested in environmental remediation may then be asked to continue in the BJT program.
- Applicants not accepted should have a chance to discuss alternative opportunities.

What can participants expect after being selected for training?

- Participants should be informed if there are any costs associated with BJT training.
- As a benefit, stipends to assist with travel expenses and childcare may be provided. (depending on the grant application)
- As much as \$5,000 worth of training and certifications (depending on the curriculum) will be provided at no cost.
- In some cases, refresher training after graduation may be provided.
- Life skills training and case management will assist program participants succeed as they complete BJT.
- Job placement assistance and post-graduation tracking will be provided.

How long before graduation and what are the dates and duration of training?

- The duration of training cohorts will vary, depending on the particular curriculum, certifications offered and training schedule.

- Some grantees schedule training Monday to Friday to simulate workday experiences.
- Saturday and evening classes are often scheduled to accommodate working participants.
- Some grantees can accommodate both unemployed and working participants with hybrid schedules.
- Training cohorts are usually timed to complement employer manpower needs and hiring schedules.
- Graduates must become qualified, trustworthy, and reliable workers.
- Graduates must meet/exceed the expectations of the employer.
- Graduates must achieve personal life changing results.

Under EPA guidelines, grantees are free to target special groups including ex-offenders, disabled workers, and special populations as long as they are chronically, or under-employed. As a result, recruitment and screening strategies are determined on a program-by-program basis, depending upon the target community, curriculum, and types of jobs available. Each BJT grantee needs to establish their own protocol for recruiting, assessing, and screening program applicants.

What is expected of accepted applicants?

- Many BJT grantees use student contracts to clarify rules of conduct and student expectations.
- Participants are expected to attend all training and certification tests.
- Certificates are not provided unless the entire training program completed.
- Standards of dress and conduct are fully enforced.
- Gang, social club, gender, and cultural associations are left at the door.
- Graduates commit to actively pursue a job, preferably in the environmental industry.
- Graduates must report salary and benefits to program managers.
- Graduates will be tracked for at least one year to assist in program evaluation.

Common traits among successful graduates

Generally, a common thread among successful grantees, independent of screening protocols, are students with the following attributes.

- Have the determination and ability needed to stick with the program.
- Willing to work in groups.
- Ability and motivation to attend all classes.
- Ready to accept new and difficult challenges.
- Ability to complete academic and physical requirements of employment. (Physical impairments may exclude workers from employment requiring mobility or use of respirators).
- Motivated for a life change and ready to embark on a new career.
- Willing to seek new opportunities with potential employers.

Applicant Screening, Assessment, and Selection

At the end of the day, the success of BJT depends on the success of program graduates. 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 BJT programs fail is an inability to find deserving and motivated participants most likely to succeed.

In addition to EPA entry requirements and attributes just noted, BJT grantees may impose additional conditions before accepting applicants for training. Additional prerequisites include the following.

- Able to lift a minimal weight package (usually 30 pounds).
- Able to pass a "fit test" physical.

- Able to attend all training and testing sessions.
- Meet minimum verbal, literacy, and math standards.
- Pass drug tests as noted in orientation sessions. (To be discussed later).
- Agree to random drug tests as presented in orientation sessions.
- Must attend multiple orientations and in some cases “tryouts”.
- Must sign a “student contract” regarding codes of conduct.
- Must be able to meet employer requirements for new hires.
- Must have a High School diploma or GED.

For those who “do not make the cut”

As previously noted, BJT grantees employ a variety of screening and assessment protocols. Even with restrictive acceptance requirements, screening may yield more qualified applicants than available seats.

- Often, waiting lists are created to replace early dropouts.
- Life skills training is provided to a larger cohort with those interested in advanced environmental training moving to the BJT program.
- Outstanding applicants can be encouraged to wait for the next cohort.
- In any situation, staff should become familiar with alternative training opportunities that may be a better fit for applicants not accepted into the BJT program.

Strategies for screening success

- Do not rush to finalize applicant selection.
- Combine cohorts if minimum class size has not been reached.
- Work closely with employers. Seek out the timing of their workforce needs.
- Establish protocols that will deliver graduates with skills and attributes requested by employers.

- The quality of graduates will reflect the quality of your program. Maintain close contact with graduates.
- Remember – every dropout is a wasted seat that a deserving student could have occupied.

More Detail About Skills and Knowledge Assessments for Verbal and Math Skills

The purpose of skills and knowledge assessment is to establish an applicant’s ability to complete the curriculum set forth in the work plan. A 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 Workforce Investment Board/One stop will administer skills and knowledge assessment evaluations. However, as part of the application/screening process, it is important that BJT program staff be involved in skills and knowledge assessments. Program staff should maintain a close working relationship with those administering the tests.

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.

In most cases, when local job centers administer math and verbal assessments, they select the evaluation tool. Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) and

WorkKeys are the most popular assessment tools used by Workforce Investment Boards/One stops. Again, the specific tool used depends on the approach recognized locally by local agencies and employers.

Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE)

TABE scores are correlated to GED scores and are often used with the Department of Labor 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. Communities with fewer applicants may use a 6-8th grade level screen while populations with large numbers of applicants may use an 8-10th grade level screen for acceptance into the program.

WorkKeys

WorkKeys was developed by ACT (creators of the ACT 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 (NCRC) certificate which can be used as a placement tool. EPA grantees have indicated that of the four levels (platinum, gold, silver, and bronze), the Silver National Career Readiness Certificate is asked for by employers. WorkKeys assessments include Applied Math, Workplace Documents, Graphic Literacy

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.

Whichever assessment tool is applied to screen BJT applicants, it should be noted that academic skills and literacy do not necessarily

determine the quality of the student. It may, however, assist in curriculum development and the need for life skills and remedial training.

More Detail About Drug Testing

Most employers will not hire graduates not willing to take or pass a drug test. Typical screens test urine for amphetamines, cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamines, opiates, nicotine, and alcohol. Tests may be required as part of pre-employment screening or may be conducted randomly by employers, especially for employees in occupations involving, teamwork, hazardous materials, or transportation.

Types of drug tests commonly used

For the majority of workplace drug tests, a 5-panel drug screen is used. In fact, this is the standard for the Federal government's guideline for [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 5-panel drug test screens for the following:

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

Some BJT programs have moved to a more rigorous testing guideline. The 10 panel drug tests are illustrated below.

The 10-panel drug test includes:

- Cocaine
- Amphetamine
- Methamphetamine
- Opiates such as heroin, codeine, and morphine

- Phencyclidine or PCP
- THC (marijuana)
- Propoxyphene
- Methadone
- Barbiturates
- Benzodiazepines

Drug testing and the extent of drug use is in the state of flux for BJT grantees. Recent scans have indicated that in many BJT programs, drug testing, especially for marijuana use, prior to acceptance into the program is not required. It should be made clear, at orientation and during training that when operating in teams and around hazardous materials, workers must remain drug-free. Drug tests can be an option for program entry, graduation, or employment. But, after a positive test for drugs, employers will not hire them or will fire them. Lax drug policies may also influence placement of future graduates if employers feel the BJT program has a lax drug policy.

Often the question arises regarding costs associated with drug testing. Many BJT programs have been successful in partnering with public health agencies for the administration of drug tests. Explore a number of possibilities including labor, health, and social service agencies in pursuing drug screening assistance.

More Detail About Physical Assessments

Environmental jobs are different from other jobs in that activities associated with employment require a degree of physical ability. If a BJT curriculum trains graduates for jobs such as those listed below, managers need to address physical attributes as part of the screening process and applicant interview.

- **Equipment handlers** may need to move equipment between various locations. Those afraid of heights cannot perform tasks associated with these occupations. Physical strength and ladder climbing ability are necessary.

- **Hazardous materials workers and inspectors** must enter confined spaces. Small, and sometimes underground or dark places including tanks, must be inspected, and cleaned. Confined space entry is a key component of many BJT programs.
- **Asbestos and lead workers** perform activities with their arms elevated for long periods of time wearing protective clothing. Strong physical attributes and the ability to work in closed and sometimes hot or humid spaces are physical requirements for this occupation.
- **Spill response and environmental cleanup** requires special protective gear. 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 also operate in hot or cold spaces.

BJT programs should not exclude students with physical limitations unless job training does not allow for alternative training. Programs concentrating on Phase I Assessment, for example, does not require physical dexterity. Other environmental occupations, including data management, communications, recordkeeping, report writing, and sample analysis can be performed in an office or lab and require clerical and cognitive skills with minimal physical activities.

More About Subjective Screening Assessments

Objective assessment tests are a screening protocol to select participants with the best chance of completing the environmental training program. BJT grantees have acknowledged that student assessment tests do not provide the most important indicators of successful candidates. Subjective assessments are best completed by program staff including trainers, case managers, and placement staff. Subjective assessments

include several applicant attributes including the following.

- Has the ability needed to stick with the program.
- Works well in groups.
- Possesses the motivation to attend all classes.
- Will accept new and difficult challenges.
- Is determined to overcome failures.
- Exhibits a positive attitude.
- Has a passion for a new career.
- Appeals to potential employers.

Strategies for determining subjective attributes

Subjective attributes of prospective program participants are best determined with personal interaction and observation of group interaction and problem solving.

- One-on-one interviews
- group discussions
- Family visits
- Open house, orientations, and problem-solving sessions
- Try-outs
- Pre-training such as life skills or construction trades not related to environmental BJT.

Tryouts and pre-training strategies have demonstrated to be an effective approach to screening participants who will be working in a team setting after graduation. Sometimes they are linked with construction safety and skills training. Often, they are administered in conjunction with life skills training requiring team problem solving. Remember, community engagement, student recruitment, and selection are key in the successful execution of a Brownfields Job Training Program.

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CONNECT notes represent individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants and EPA Environmental Job Training grant recipients. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. Copies of prior CONNECT issues can be found at Brownfields-toolbox.org

HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges providing technician training and environmental workforce technical assistance since 1987. For more information on HMTRI technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact us at: HMTRI@eicc.edu.



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