

CONNECT News

Community Support, Networking, and Assistance for Environmental Career Training



The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges (HMTRI-EICC), with a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA), assists communities establish environmental job training programs. To better exchange ideas, HMTRI-EICC distributes CONNECT News, featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA Brownfields Environmental Job Training (BJT) grant program.

This month's issue explores "best practices" used by successful job training programs when recruiting, screening, and selecting program participants.



Recruiting, Screening, and Selecting Successful BJT Applicants

Among the various components that make up a successful Brownfields Job Training Program, selection and screening of incoming students is critical. Experienced grantees say that the quality and reputation of a program is highly dependent on the quality and performance of its graduates. Conversely, a primary reason for program failure is often attributed to a lack of attention to student recruitment and screening. Failure to recruit successful students often includes the following:

- Accepting students not ready for the challenges presented by a rigorous training schedule.
- Recruitment of unmotivated or disinterested applicants.
- Acceptance of students uninformed or misinformed of program requirements.
- Rushing into the recruitment process unprepared.
- Lack of interest by the community resulting in low applicant turnout.
- Lack of a coherent recruitment, and screening policy.

Student Recruitment Begins with Community Awareness

Student recruitment begins before the first student candidate is approached for consideration. It begins when the BJT grant application is first being prepared.

Community awareness informs local residents, potential partners, and employers of the proposed training program being planned. Informing stakeholders can easily be integrated into community and labor market assessments. Selling Brownfields Job Training to local government interests, community groups, service providers and employers early in grant development will contribute to recruitment success after the grant is awarded and student selection begins. Marketing the benefits of environmental training to community influencers accelerates after the grant is funded and before student recruitment begins. Community awareness forms a foundation and is an essential effort in establishing acceptance of Brownfield Job Training in the target community.

Awareness begins with presentations announcing the development of an EPA grant application at City Council meetings, community meetings, church gatherings, social and public media announcements. When addressing potential stakeholders, the following topics should be addressed.



- What is an Environmental Technician?
- Are there Jobs for environmental technicians?
- Where are the jobs? How much do they pay?
- Can Brownfields Job Training lead to a career?
- Specifically, how does an EPA Job Training Grant work?

What is an Environmental Technician?

Photos and videos provide some of the best illustrations of environmental technicians. YouTube links provide excellent examples of environmental technicians at work. It is important that illustrations provided reflect the type of training proposed in the BJT grant application.

Are there Jobs for environmental technicians?

When integrated into a comprehensive labor market assessment, information collected provides answers to the question of employment opportunities. Local Google searches posting job openings for environmental technicians provide additional support for graduate demand. When addressing BJT employment opportunities it is also important to address ancillary occupations that require the skills, knowledge, and certifications graduates will acquire upon program completion.

Where are the jobs? How much do they pay?

As with labor market demand, work locations, working conditions, and prevailing wages are important factors when determining if a community is ready to embrace a Brownfield Job Training Program. Information for answering these questions can also be obtained as part of the labor market assessment during grant application development.

Can Brownfields Job Training lead to a career?

Experienced grantees have an easier time responding to environmental career opportunities as they have successful graduates to call upon discussing employment after graduation. Testimonials from graduates are the most powerful approach to demonstrating post graduate success. New grantees can provide videos of graduates from other BJT programs who have gone onto successful careers. HMTRI publishes a *Social Media Directory* that provides BJT grantee websites with testimonials from former graduates. <https://brownfieldstoolbox.org/social-media-directory/>

Specifically, how does an EPA Job Training Grant work?

As part of the community assessment and target selection process, Brownfield Job Training Grantees need to convey the benefits of BJT to potential stakeholders. Convincing local residents and organizations that a BJT grant is a good fit for their community involves discussing benefits and expectations as early as possible in grant development.

- ***Who is sponsoring the training program?***

The US Environmental Protection Agency supports the Brownfield job Training (BJT) with \$500K grants over 5 years. Additional resources will be needed from local organizations to leverage EPA funds.

- ***How much does it cost?***

Once accepted, there will be no cost to participants for the training program. There is no cost to the community since matching funds are not required to obtain an EPA Brownfield Job Training grant.

- ***Why does the program exist?***

Brownfields Job Training is part of EPA's effort to support environmental Justice by providing career opportunities to unemployed and underemployed residents of underserved communities.

- ***How does the program contribute to the community?***

Environmental jobs can provide stable, good paying jobs for community residents.

- ***What can participants expect from the program?***

BJT will provide graduates with training and certifications that would normally cost employers in excess of \$5,000 for equivalent training.

- ***What are the expectations of the students?***

Students will be vetted, must attend every class, complete the entire training program, and be committed to begin a new career.

- ***How many jobs will be filled with BJT graduates?***

The number of graduates depends upon the program being offered. Typically, each training cohort consists of 20 students with as many as three training cohorts offered each year.

- ***Who is eligible to participate in the program?***

BJT targets unemployed and underemployed citizens and permanent residents over the age of 18 upon graduation.

After convincing governmental agencies, local nonprofits, and community organizations the EPA Brownfields Job Training grant is a good fit for their community, a grant application can proceed with community and stakeholder support. It can take another six months after the application is submitted for BJT awards to be made. After being accepted for funding consideration, it is time to focus on student recruitment which involves a more detailed awareness effort and transparency regarding the specifics of the program.



Applicant Recruitment

Selection of a student class, motivated and determined to start a new career is the goal of applicant recruitment. Inadequate attention to the importance of this effort can lead to training issues, low retention and placement rates, and ultimately poor graduate satisfaction. Brownfield Job Training grantees experiencing issues with program implementation usually attribute their mistake to hurried or inadequate participant recruitment. Choosing a class is similar to selecting a basketball team. Are participants motivated? Do they work well as a team? Do they demonstrate an ability to learn and grow? In the case of BJT applicants, after training, will they be employable? Participant slots are limited and must be granted to the most deserving residents most likely to succeed. Selecting applicants who will complete the program, attend all classes, pursue opportunities presented and most likely be hired is a multi-level recruitment and screening process. The first objective in the recruitment process is to enlist as many applicant candidates as possible. In instances where there are only a few acceptable applicant candidates to screen, it is advisable to postpone the training schedule rather than begin with an insufficient number of qualified candidates.

Finding potential applicants

Current BJT grantees use a variety of methods in recruiting community residents who may be interested in applying for Brownfields Job Training. Those methods include the following.

- Referrals from employment centers
- Direct recruitment
- Referrals from community organizations and nonprofits
- Recommendations from program graduates

Working with employment centers

Working with the local Workforce Investment Boards (WIB) or career center as an initial recruitment and placement tool is “a great start” but not the final solution to applicant recruitment. Local workforce organizations operate under a variety of names and organizational structures including Job Link Centers, Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs, WIA, WIOLA) or Career Centers. These are state and local employment centers directly or indirectly supported by the US Department of Labor with the purpose of expanding the nation’s employed workforce.

Career centers can start the process by providing a supply of interested applicants. Every Brownfield Job Training program should establish a relationship with local employment agencies. These agencies can provide a multitude of services besides applicant referral including initial screening, applicant assessment tests and employment counseling. Job centers can qualify applicants for benefits that may include training materials, transportation, equipment, and other support services.

Direct recruitment

Many programs supplement career center referrals with direct recruitment activities including open house events, awareness sessions, presentations, “word of mouth” and marketing promotions. Both of these strategies work well together in tandem. Direct recruitment or marketing may involve public service announcements, social media postings, radio shows and print media. It is important to remember that marketing should be directed to audiences and locations frequented by prospective applicants. For example, posters in laundry mats, grocery stores and bus stations. Social media should address sites such as Instagram or TicToc. Public service press releases and radio announcements should be broadcast in the media with an audience frequented by the demographic being recruited.

Referrals from community organizations and nonprofits

Faith based organizations and community social service organizations provide an excellent source for applicant referrals. It is important that applicant awareness and marketing materials be provided to these organizations which have the ability to leverage applicant recruitment efforts.

For those programs oriented towards returning citizens, prison release staff, parole managers and case workers, can refer potential candidates interested in starting a new career in environmental remediation.

Recommendations from program graduates

Perhaps the most powerful source for applicant recruitment are referrals from current and former students. Graduates provide firsthand information on program expectations, challenges, and rewards. Sisters, brothers, and friends often apply to BJT programs after a relative or acquaintance successfully completes the program and finds satisfying employment. It is important that graduates stay involved and maintain ownership in the BJT program. Graduates should be encouraged to attend classes, graduation, and refreshers as they continue their career. Some grantees provide recertification opportunities as a way of tracking and maintaining contact with graduates.

Applicant Awareness

As with community awareness, applicant awareness is an integral part of the recruitment process. Prospective applicants need to be fully informed of what to expect from orientation through graduation. There should be no surprises regarding student expectations after a candidate is accepted into training. Most BJT programs will have at least one orientation session. Many will require attendance at a follow-up session. The purpose of multiple sessions is to “weed out” candidates not ready to commit to a rigorous training program. Here are examples of topics that should be covered at orientation and applicant awareness sessions.

- Requirements to enter the program.
- The application process.
- The applicant selection process.
- What can BJT participants expect?
- Expectations of accepted applicants.
- Anticipated Dates and duration of training.

Requirements to enter the program

The question of drug testing and drug use should be addressed if required for entry, program participation or graduation. Other program requirements include the following.

- At the time of graduation, participants must be at least 18 years old and a US Citizen or permanent resident.
- Students must attend the entire program and complete certification requirements to graduate.
- Graduates must be willing to report salary employment tracking information after graduation.
- There may be a physical test (for fit test or lifting).
- Applicants must be unemployed, underemployed, or low income.
- In some programs, students will be required to sign a “Student Contract” itemizing student expectations and program policies.

The application process.

At community presentations and during orientation sessions, potential applicants need to know exactly how to apply for training.

- Prospective applicants need to attend an orientation session or sessions.
- Personal information needs to be collected by filling out printed or online forms.
- Applicants should expect a follow up phone call to collect additional or missing information.
- After an initial screening, applicants should expect an interview by phone or in person.

- Qualified participants may need to complete a literacy assessment (WorkKey Assessment, TABE, or alternative exam).
- Applicants should be informed of the acceptance or rejection date.

What can BJT participants expect?

- Technical, life skills and work preparedness training at no cost
- Employment assistance
- Perhaps a stipend to assist with childcare or travel expenses
- Training and reference materials
- Approximately \$5,000 worth of training certifications (depending on program offerings)
- Inclusion into a select group of vetted and trained technicians

Expectations of accepted applicants.

- Completion of the entire training program before graduation
- Attending all classes, training, and certification events
- In many cases, signing a “student contract” defining expectations and a code of conduct outlining expected behavior during training

Dates and duration of training.

- Day, evening, or weekend instruction
- Location of instruction
- Duration of training
- Anticipated graduation dates

The objective of the applicant recruitment process is to develop BJT interest in as many potential applicants as possible and at the same time fully inform them of the challenges and rewards that come with the program.

Applicant Screening and Assessment

Screening acts as a funnel, selecting the best qualified most deserving applicants to fill a limited number of seats available in the training cohort. When marketing efforts are successful in generating more applicant candidates than openings available, program managers will have one, perhaps two consecutive orientation sessions detailing program requirements and expectations. Orientation sessions act as an initial screening tool eliminating applicants not serious about or willing to be inconvenienced as a condition for entering the program.

As the number of applicant candidates decreases after learning the rigors of the training program, a variety of strategies to find the best applicants are often applied. The following advanced screening techniques creates a “short list” of candidates to be considered for training.

- Assessment tests
- “One on One” and group interviews
- Family visits
- Try-outs - Open house and working sessions
- Preparatory training
- Final applicant selection



Assessment tests

In addition to background and basic applicant information, job centers administer assessment tests. Assessment tests ensure that applicants will have a sufficient background knowledge to understand and learn concepts presented in the BJT curriculum. Assessment tests administered by career centers may include:

- Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE)
- WorkKeys
- Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS)

Each type of assessment test has advantages and drawbacks. Each can provide certificates for potential employers and provides a good measure of a student's knowledge of reading, math, and informational skills. While TABE tests are most common among Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Programs, all are being used depending on local preferences. Standards for accepting students into the environmental training program vary from 9th to 10th grade. Some job training grantees bypass assessment tests requiring a high school or GED diploma.

"One on One" and group interviews

Program managers acknowledge that student assessment tests do not provide the most important indicators of successful candidates. Subjective applicant assessment, while one of the most important indicators of student success, is the most difficult to administer. In person assessments are best completed by the BJT program managers including instructors, student support and placement staff rather than the local job center. Attributes of exceptional candidates include the following applicant qualities.

- Sticking with the program
- Determination
- Working well in groups
- Attending all classes
- Accepting new and difficult challenges
- A passion for their new career
- Appealing to potential employers

Family visits

Some Brownfield Job Training programs will follow in person interviews with family visits. This particular approach may be useful when transportation or childcare stipends are involved. Family visits are usually reserved prior to final acceptance into training. Coordination with case workers provides an opportunity to determine if external issues will interfere with successful completion of the training program.

Try-outs - Open house and working sessions

Orientation sessions and even in person interviews will not always reveal how a candidate will work in a group or team setting. Working with hazardous materials relies heavily on partner trust and team cooperation. Try-outs consists of simple and sometimes challenging team building exercises allowing program staff to observe how applicants work together. Anger issues and the ability to work in a team environment is best observed completing simple tasks requiring team cooperation.



Preparatory training

Pre training (training such as life skills or construction trades not related to environmental training) provides an opportunity to observe students in a classroom setting. Preparatory training works best in larger organizations where training alternatives are available. Providing life skills training prior to the technical curriculum gives applicants a chance to determine if the BJT program is a good fit. Another variation of this strategy is an advanced training program coupled with construction skills training. Students successfully completing construction skills training may be given an opportunity to additionally receive environmental remediation training with entry into the BJT program.

Final Applicant selection

After initial recruitment, preliminary and advanced screening, the final step in the application process is to present the student contract, signed by accepted applicants. The student contract is not a legally binding document but rather a promise, from both sides, of program goals and expectations. Student contracts and program expectations are usually discussed early in the application process, but formal signing adds importance and significance to the selection process.

Applicant Rejection

What happens when an applicant is rejected? When applicants pass assessment screens but do not demonstrate a desire or interest required of successful participants, program managers can be faced with a challenging situation. It cannot be assumed that applicants will understand the severe limitation of resources associated with BJT programs. Rejected applicants, especially those passing several filters, need to have alternative opportunity recommendations presented. Perhaps another trade or occupation with feedback to the career center for additional assistance is in order. When applicants are qualified, waiting lists for the next cohort may be a reasonable approach.

Establishing a Policy for Documenting Acceptance and Rejection of Applicants

Clearly, some residents may view the Brownfields Job Training program as somewhere to go, better than nothing, or a right rather than an opportunity. For this reason, it is recommended to begin a conversation about establishing a policy for acceptance and rejection of applicants. This conversation may additionally expand to the development of an objective, documented methodology for student recruitment. The use of ranking criteria in selecting grantees may provide a starting point for such conversations.



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

