



In Jacksonville, Environmental Training Offers a World of New Opportunities

With help from an EPA grant, Florida State College at Jacksonville compiles a wealth of local resources to create a program that changes lives and neighborhoods

W Jacksonville, Florida

ithin the heart of the City of Jacksonville, Florida lies a federally-designated Empowerment Zone, where neighborhoods are littered with abandoned and underused property and nearly 40 percent of residents live below the poverty level. With more than 12,000 acres of identified brownfields—more than any other city in Florida—Jacksonville has been working to return its idle sites to productive use; the city received EPA Brownfields Assessment grants in 1997 and 2003, and a Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund grant for site cleanup in 1999. Those grants enabled more than 120 environmental assessments and leveraged over \$2 million in cleanup and redevelopment funding, generating momentum for continued assessment, cleanup and site reuse. These efforts have created a higher-than-average demand for workers trained in environmental cleanup in Jacksonville.

Recognizing that need, Florida State College at Jacksonville (FSCJ) applied for a Brownfields Job Training grant from EPA and received a \$500,000 award in September 2009 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The College partnered with local, nonprofit organizations to carry out student recruitment and retention strategies, and with other area entities, including private-sector environmental firms, to implement the course curricula.

FSCJ's Job Training program features 17 different courses, covering 270 hours over a seven-week schedule. Students are trained in areas that include OSHA Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER), environmental sampling and analysis, deconstruction and debris removal, lead and asbestos abatement, and confined space entry. To complement existing trends, the program offers a focus on "green" remediation techniques as well as traditional cleanup methods, ensuring that cleanup is sustainable and will be safe for both the community and environment in the long term. To round out this environmental focus, the curriculum includes training in general brownfields issues and community redevelopment, CPR and first aid, math and computer skills, and job interview and work-life skills.



February 2010 graduates of FSCJ's Environmental Job Training program assemble outside of their training facility.

JUST THE FACTS:

- FSCJ partnered with local nonprofit organizations to actively recruit candidates for job training in a number of ways.
- The program's curriculum includes expert training volunteered from environmental consulting firms, as well as the local Small Business Association and the Jacksonville Housing Authority.
- Training offers an emphasis on "green" remediation methods including phytoremediation, bioremediation, green deconstruction, and xeriscaping.

*FSCJ's
first job training
course graduated 22 of the
24 students selected,
a retention rate of more
than 90 percent.*

To recruit committed candidates in an area rife with unemployment and poverty, FSCJ enlisted the help of local partners such as Jacksonville Youth Works, a nonprofit that helps at-risk youth receive job training in fields like construction and skilled labor; FreshMinistries, Inc., a multi-faith, nonprofit humanitarian organization; and WorkSource, an agency that provides workforce-related services in six Florida counties. These entities worked diligently to inform the public about the Job Training program's availability—handing out informational flyers and program applications, setting up booths at area grocery stores, holding informational sessions at community centers, and even going door-to-door in some neighborhoods. The result was nearly 200 applications for a class limited to 24 students per training round.

Per the requirements of EPA's grant, FSCJ's program (which includes multiple training rounds over a three-year period) must keep at least 134 of its expected 170 graduates employed for at least a year, which meant that their application process had to select candidates that were fully committed. "We go through a rigorous screening process," explained Pamela Scherer, Manager of the FSCJ Job Training Program. "We look for neatness and attention to detail in the application itself and conduct multiple interviews with every candidate. We also perform adult education testing, criminal background checks, and drug screenings. By the time we're finished we're confident that an applicant is committed to the program."

Four students were hired immediately after graduation, and FSCJ is working with local partners to find jobs for all of the program's trainees.

One of the 24 students selected for FSCJ's first round of EPA-funded training was Michael Smith, a 47-year old father of a baby girl. Smith had been looking for work for more than a year. "I had sent out 227 resumes and gotten nowhere," Smith relates. "There were so many people out there wanting jobs... I was competing with everyone who had access to the Internet."

Smith's luck changed when he spoke with a member of his church choir who was also a representative from a local workforce development organization, and learned about the FSCJ Brownfields Job Training Program. He promptly filled out an application and made it his mission to demonstrate his commitment to the program. "I was constantly going in [to the FSCJ program office] and checking on my status, and talking with people from the program," said Smith. "I think it gave me an edge. They could tell that I was interested in a long-term career, not just a job, and that I've always been interested in the environment. I wanted to make this world a better place for my daughter."

Training at FSCJ's downtown facility began in January 2010 and featured instruction and input from a spectrum of local partners. Geosyntec, an international environmental consulting firm with offices in Jacksonville, donated 16 hours of training from senior-level engineers and geologists. The Jacksonville Small Business Association provided business and worker skills training. And the Jacksonville Housing Authority offered the students bus tickets and transportation reimbursements to ensure that students could attend.

Geosyntec's emphasis on green remediation included training in methods such as phytoremediation, the use of plants to extract contamination from soil; and bioremediation, which uses natural bacteria to literally eat contaminants away. Students also learned about green deconstruction—the recycling

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and reuse of construction materials—as well as “xeriscaping” techniques, where landscaping uses only natural plants and other elements that require no more water than occurs in natural weather patterns.

Graduation for FSCJ’s first environmental job training class was held on February 26, 2010. Twenty-two of the twenty-four students graduated—including Michael Smith, who was in the top five percent of his class. After a year of fruitless job searches, Smith was one of four FSCJ trainees hired immediately after graduation. “I’ll be working as an environmental technician for a local company, in a contract with the city,” he explains. “We’ll be doing ground remediation, cleaning up contaminated sites in the area. [The FSCJ program] wanted the people who lived in affected areas to get these jobs, so we could clean up our own neighborhoods.”

FSCJ is working with the WorkSource agency and more than 15 local environmental firms to find work for the program’s graduates, matching newly-certified environmental technicians with the needs of the firms’ clients. “I’m so impressed with this city, and how much people care,” says Scherer. “Sometimes I wondered how we were going to get past certain obstacles, but they always were taken care of because of the momentum we have and the dedication of the people involved.”

Smith has his own praise for the program. “Environmental remediation is a large field and a large area,” he elaborates. “Once you get these certifications you can go in a lot of different directions. You could work in a lab, in an office, in other states, and even overseas. It gives you a wide range of opportunities.”

CONTACTS:

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Visit the EPA Brownfields Web site at:
www.epa.gov/brownfields/