FLORIDA STATE COLLEGE AT JACKSONVILLE: NEW APPROACHES LEAD TO IMPROVED OUTCOMES

H-1B Ready to Work (RTW) grantee Florida State College at Jacksonville’s (FSCJ) Information Technology Rapid Employment (I-Tech) program targets H-1B occupations in the high-demand computer information technology (CIT) industry of Jacksonville and the surrounding northeast Florida region. The program includes an upfront assessment process, work-based learning activities, certification training, comprehensive supportive services, and articulation to advanced career ladder and lattice occupations.

The grantee is on track to meeting their performance goals and is excelling in job placements. As of June 2017, they have the fourth highest entered employment rate among RTW grantees. In addition, FSCJ has secured training-related employment for 99 percent of participants that were placed in jobs – the best performance rating amongst all RTW grantees. The two keys to their success have been effective marketing and keeping partners and participants engaged.

FSCJ started their grant with strong employer partnerships and a traditional marketing strategy that included banners, flyers, postcards, newspaper, radio ads, and word of mouth. By March 2016, these strategies for promoting their program and helping program completers secure employment were clearly working. FSCJ ranked seventh among their RTW peers in reaching their total targeted number of participants served. They were also successful in securing employment for their participants, ranking sixth, however they wanted to improve their program participant numbers. This proved to be more difficult than expected due to entities beyond their control.

Companies were changing their pre-employment requirements and focused on the bottom line. Limited funding was available for participant training. Participants also had unrealistic expectations about the results of the program, they were not following through as needed, and they lacked the soft skills employers desired. To increase participant enrollment and job placement, the program staff incorporated a variety of strategies, which included collaborating with the college’s marketing department, focusing on the development of new partnerships, and ensuring that participants and partners are engaged in new and exciting ways. These strategies were successful.

By June 2017, FSCJ was on track to meeting their goal for total number of participants served, had greatly improved their training enrollment and completion numbers, and continued to excel in job placement. The grantee was over 71 percent of the way to reaching their total targeted number of participants served, had more than tripled the number of participants that began training, and achieved 54 percent of their goal for total number of participants that completed training. FSCJ’s training completion rank among RTW grantees jumped to seventh highest.

The purpose of this resource brief is to provide a closer look at how one grantee managed to turn their performance around by increasing their marketing exposure to reach a larger, more targeted audience and changing their program design based on employer and participant needs. This brief describes FSCJ’s strategies in detail and provides a model of how your program can replicate the grantee’s success.
EFFECTIVE OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT LEAD TO INCREASED PARTICIPANTS SERVED

Partnership with the Marketing and Communications Department: FCSJ has an ongoing relationship with the institution’s Marketing and Communications Department. The grantee informs the department of all RTW activities and continues to request feedback to improve their outreach and recruitment efforts. Additionally, the department assists the grantee with marketing campaigns, the development of materials, and they share new approaches.

Non-traditional marketing strategies. FCSJ has developed several innovative strategies to promote their program.

- **Billboards:** Promotional billboards in high-traffic areas around the city of Jacksonville have been a very successful outreach method. The billboards do not target a specific age group. This results in word of mouth promotion of the program, which leads to many calls to the grantee from potential participants.

- **Bus Wraps:** Bus wraps are traveling billboards that present announcements directly in front of potential participants. Announcements can be placed on the sides of geographically-targeted buses that travel through selective communities.

- **Geofencing:** Geofencing complements FSCJ’s outdoor marketing campaigns by sending location-based messages to smartphone users when they enter a defined geographic area. This provides users with what they want, and when they want it. For example, a virtual fence can be established around billboards, the college campus, locations frequented by the grantee’s target populations, and other points of interest that are related in some way to the RTW program. Once in the fenced area, smartphone users can receive real-time, tailored information such as the wait time to see a career counselor or the next course registration deadline.

- **Marketing video:** The grantee’s program manager and case manager are working closely with FSCJ’s marketing department to create a video of RTW participant success stories that will be featured on the program’s promotional website.

- **Referral cards that promote the RTW program.** These 3x6 cards target specific industries. They are distributed during Chamber of Commerce meetings and other employer engagement activities. The cards show employers that FSCJ is a viable pipeline for talent.

- **Partners as references.** FSCJ uses key employer partners CSX Corporation and Jackson Sheriff’s Office (JSO) as references when approaching new businesses. Letters recommending the program and written by current partners are used to promote the program to additional training providers and local employers.

OUTCOMES

In the last year alone, the grantee has successfully engaged dozens of companies as strong supporters of their RTW program. As current partnerships are strengthened and new partnerships are formed, employers are playing a larger role in participant success. They are attending meet and greets, encouraging RTW interns to attain credentials after securing employment, and providing program guidance, including input on training design and curriculum, participant recruitment, program evaluation, work-based learning opportunities, and job opportunities for qualified participants. Even when companies are experiencing tough times, they continue to accept RTW interns and remain involved with the program. This has led to increased enrollments, credential attainment rates, and job placements. The relationships formed and strengthened through RTW can and will extend beyond the life of the grant, supporting FSCJ’s efforts to help students reach their educational goals and secure employment.
PROGRAM DESIGN STRATEGIES TO EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR SUCCESS

Merit-based tuition assistance: Initially, tuition assistance was not a part of FSCJ’s RTW grant, but potential participants often assumed that a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor meant free training. This conflicted with the grantee’s belief that participants are more likely to succeed when they have skin in the game. To address this, FSCJ received approval to use some of their grant funds for tuition assistance. All participants have a personal stake in their success because they must pay for their first class. After the first class is completed and on a regular basis throughout the program, the grantee determines who has the potential to succeed by evaluating a variety of factors, such as attendance, grades, commitment to program completion, and financial need.

OUTCOMES

Although the stress caused by unemployment can negatively affect the morale of long-term unemployed job seekers, FSCJ has discovered that “there is security in the anxiety” of starting a training program. When participants are accepted into the program, they feel that they have succeeded in something. They also feel anxious about paying for classes and getting into the mindset needed to excel in the training. The first class is a shock because participants feel like they are back in school. As they complete the class, participants realize that the training will get them ready for the real world and improve their job prospects. They start to understand that their success is in their hands. Each class they pass and any tuition assistance they receive motivate participants to complete training, attain credentials, and secure employment.

KEYS TO REPLICATION

- **Co-location of services.** All grant services from single locations on the FSCJ campus are managed efficiently. Partnerships and collaborations have now become more accessible to program participants.
- **Keep cohorts small.** For FSCJ, maintaining a small cohort of 15-20 participants has maximized job placement opportunities at the end of the training. With larger cohorts, some people tend to drop out, which affects morale of the remaining participants. In addition, smaller cohorts make it more likely that jobs will be available for participants at the end of training. Ensuring that jobs are available at the end of the internship helps minimize the appearance that internships are free labor for employers.
- **Leverage partnerships strategically to promote your program.** For example, identify non-traditional partners and attend relevant events that they sponsor or take your message to where your potential participants are by collaborating with groups that serve them.
- **Continue developing new employer partnerships.** Building new relationships with local businesses is essential for successful participant placement and satisfying local business needs. When a program participant gets an interview, reach out to the company to introduce them to your RTW program. Develop outreach materials for prospective companies and target industries.
- **Constant partner and participant engagement:** Opening doors is vital, but keeping them open is also very important. Regular contact and communication with partners and participants is crucial to maintaining business partner relationships and ultimately the success of the program. The grantee caters to employer needs.
by participating in an employer steering committee that meets regularly, responding to hiring needs quickly, and maintaining contact through email. It’s also important to stay in touch with participants to ensure continued success, encourage progression towards credential attainment, and keep them in the loop regarding new job opportunities. One strategy that FSCJ uses is to require participation in study groups. This helps participants improve their organization and communication skills.

CONCLUSION

This brief highlighted some of Florida State College at Jacksonville’s most successful and innovative approaches to outreach recruitment, and participant and employer engagement. Not all strategies may be appropriate or as successful for your RTW program, but there are many other approaches available. Don’t be afraid to try new ways of promoting your program and engaging participants and partners.

If you are considering implementing new strategies, contact your FPO. To share your promising practices or discuss strategies with fellow RTW grantees, join the discussion on the today!