How to Develop Successful One-Cohort Construction Projects

There are many advantages to engaging learners in vocational projects including: learning and developing new construction skills and the experience gained in all phases of a project from start to finish, the gaining of valuable employability skills, and cross-curricular connections in math, history, science, language arts and vocabulary.

1. A beginning point for new programs or program staff is reading your grant and understanding the project that is outlined within, as the project particulars and scope are defined.

2. If this is not the case and a new project needs to be found, begin by brainstorming (include members of student policy committee and all staff) manageable projects that serve multiple goals such as: meet DOL requirements for a housing project, educational goals, AmeriCorps service learning goals and leadership opportunities, etc. Consider if and what green components could play a role in your project(s). Drive around your community and see what is needed or missing, or what could add value. Partnering on an existing project that may have stalled or is incomplete and offers a vast array of learning experiences for students could be a viable option. (Some potential projects might be: a full scale gut rehabilitation project, a new home construction project, several comprehensive weatherization projects which include rehabilitation, the construction of a full construction laboratory with hands on training modules, etc.) Keep in mind, the number of students and staff, staff experience and knowledge, partnerships in place and potentially new relationships that could add value. (Cities, Housing Authorities, Habitat for Humanity, Rebuild Together, etc.)

3. Next narrow the brainstorm list of potential projects, current and new curricula would be reviewed by staff and used as a guide to selecting potential projects that would align to meet student and all organization grant goals. Projects too large in scope or complexity need to be eliminated. It is reasonable that 25-30 students and 2-4 experienced vocational staff can complete two new homes or one rehabilitation project and 2-4 full scale weatherization projects within one years’ time. A good rule of thumb is take a typical or rigid production schedule and depending upon experience of staff, to double or triple the time for scheduling purposes. It is critical in project(s) selection that students will be exposed to a large variety of skills. For example 4-5 painting projects would not meet DOL requirements, as student learning is limited, however if these projects were in addition to projects that included rough and trim carpentry, roofing, siding, etc. the student skill growth potential is greatly increased.

4. Select project(s) that are a fit and begin preplanning.

5. Create a project schedule. Break the project(s) selected down to manageable steps that can be placed on shared calendar so that staff can be in sync and alignment working towards milestones. When building a production schedule for project(s) it is important to building in flexibility (contingencies) to the schedule or add some additional time to each task or project phase as there will be time delays or challenges to meeting goals. It is also critical to realistically evaluate project constraints (cost, time, experience level, staff, etc.)

6. Cost out project(s) and compare to budget. Verify that necessary tools and equipment are owned or can be purchased out of funding source. Partnering with suppliers is critical to reducing costs. Following internal or DOL bidding and selection process is vital. Equally important make sure contractors can meet time lines in project schedule and that they are willing to work towards a meaningful student learning
experience. In categorizing costs, make sure to overlay expenditures with project schedule as waiting to draw down funds create additional constraints.

7. Finalize project schedule and budget. Gain approval on project plan from Executive Director. At this point you are ready to begin the project.

8. Construction staff needs to closely monitor the project(s) progress, visual charts are often beneficial to staff and students. Meet with staff (weekly) and students (daily) to review progress and highlight next steps and assign tasks. Documents progress through photo, video, student blog or on web page.

9. If possible have all staff spend time on project. Staff can use project to illustrate part of a lesson, teach on site when safe to do so or staff can work with vocational staff for a day to demonstrate staff unity and buy-in, learning new skills with students and validating student accomplishments.

10. Celebrate accomplishments of completed projects and acknowledge student growth and experience. Have students lead tours, open house and press photo shoot. Students compiled portfolios can also be a great tool used to demonstrate work history, skills learned, as well as a leadership opportunity for students present the portfolio orally with within the program and for future employment interviews.