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In This Issue

Principal Investigators from three youth-based ITEST projects—Dan Calvert (Salmon Camp Research Team), Bonnie Styles (Museum Tech Academy), and Michele Masucci (Building IT Skills [BITS] among Inner City Youth in North Philadelphia)—discuss how community partnerships strengthen their efforts to recruit and retain diverse participants. They also share other recruitment and retention strategies—successful and unsuccessful—that their projects have tried. This IdeaBrief is a summary of an ITEST LRC conference call held in October 2005.

About ITEST

The Information Technology Experiences for Students and Teachers (ITEST) program was established by the National Science Foundation in direct response to the concern about shortages of IT workers in the United States. The ITEST program funds projects that provide opportunities for both school-age children and teachers to build the skills and knowledge needed to advance their study and to enable them to function and contribute in a technologically rich society. The ITEST National Learning Resource Center at EDC supports, synthesizes, and disseminates the program's learnings to a wide audience.



Recruiting and Retaining Diverse Participants through Community Partnerships and Other Strategies

In order to assist other ITEST projects in their recruitment and retention efforts, **ITEST Principal Investigators Dan Calvert, Bonnie Styles, and Michele Masucci** describe strategies their projects have tried, which worked, which didn't, and how partnerships have enabled them to reach project goals. **Three partners that all three speakers highlight as being vital to their programs are school systems, community-based organizations, and parents.**

Recruitment: Increasing the Visibility of ITEST in the Community

Before young people become ITEST participants, they must first discover the program. Speakers describe reaching out to students through schools, partner-sponsored open houses, local media, and word of mouth.

Dan Calvert speaks about recruiting Native American students:

“[Salmon Camp] works a lot with various Indian education departments in the public school systems throughout Oregon, Washington, and California. There are usually several within each state. We interact with the administration; it's a really good way to get our message across. We also work with BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) schools across the country.”

Museum Tech Academy in Springfield, Illinois, recruits students from low-income backgrounds, and has a particular emphasis on involving young women. Towards that end, Bonnie Styles describes reaching out to educators:

“We work very closely with principals and teachers. Our recruitment strategies include presenting to principals and teachers at meetings, and distributing brochures and applications.”

In addition to working with educators, Open Houses have been successful recruiting events for Museum Tech Academy. The events give students and

their families an opportunity to tour the facilities and ask questions. Working with local media is key:

“We had a press release that advertised our Open House. Also, we worked with a writer from our local newspaper and a major feature story on our program came out the week of our Open House, which was fantastic. It really increased attendance.”

Community-based organizations are another way to reach potential participants. Museum Tech Academy’s Community Advisory Group includes partners such as the YWCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Club, and the Urban League, while Salmon Camp partners with many Native American youth groups.

“Salmon Camp has been around for 10-12 years. It’s an advantage—we’ve built up relationships with many students and their parents and families. I interact with parents on a daily basis. It’s a really important component: letting them know that you are genuinely interested in the welfare of their child and really committed to the program.”

~Dan Calvert

According to all three speakers, communication with parents and families is essential. For example,

“[Museum Tech Academy parents] have to sign a learning contract with the students. They participate in focus groups with our evaluator and give us their thoughts on the program.” ~Bonnie Styles

Listening to parents’ concerns helped BITS solve an enrollment problem. While Open Houses work well for Museum Tech Academy, the strategy did not prove effective for BITS. Michele Masucci explains:

“What we had originally intended was to recruit through open houses that were sponsored by our community partners. In the end, they weren’t well attended... Once we made the shift [from the community center] to the Temple University main campus, enrollment numbers took off. A lot of parents indicated to us that safety concerns prevented them from sending their kids to the community center.

Now we have an elaborate permission policy. Once kids are done with the program, they are usually leaving Temple University campus in the early evening and returning home by way of public transportation. We work with parents quite closely on what their preferences are and stay in contact with families in case there are any changes in plans.”

Retention: Engaging Young People through Program Content

All three of the speakers’ ITEST projects utilize partnerships in some way to deliver program content. The nature of the partnership depends on each program’s goals. For example, BITS partners with several organizations in order to conduct GIS research and to provide mentoring for its students:

“The nature of our project is to develop a community GIS—our ITEST program is anchored to a basic research design. Our kids are actually involved almost in the way that research assistants would be to develop the information system. In terms of a participatory model, that means that our relationships with our community organization partners are focused on the development of the community GIS.

About half of our students fail the year of school before they join our program or they are in summer school to make up credits so they can advance in the fall. Our focus is working with at-risk youth. We work with students we think have potential to go to college but who just don’t see it in their own futures. We have a very intensive mentoring program through Harrison Campus Compact (Temple University students). The idea is to partner our participants with folks who are four, five, six years down the road from where they are. The students get a lot of one-on-one attention from the mentors, many of whom are from similar backgrounds.” ~Michele Masucci

Museum Tech Academy partners with the Center for American Archaeology in order to provide excavation experiences:

“We think that our content, including natural sciences, archaeology, and technology, helps us attract students. Students participate in an excavation dur-

ing their first summer, between their first and second years in the program. We know from experience that archaeology tends to attract females. The majority of students pursuing archaeology in college are female.” ~Bonnie Styles

Salmon Camp partners with tribal elders and Native American scientists who become program teachers:

“The cultural aspect of our program is very important as well. We’re working with tribal elders all over the Northwest. We find that as our participants are engaged in more culturally relevant activities, they get excited about it. We’re trying to align Western science with traditional Native American knowledge. In many areas of natural resource management, these two are coming together. For some students, this is the first opportunity they have had to learn about their culture.” ~Dan Calvert

Retention: Stipends and Other Incentives

Speakers frequently mentioned stipends as critical components of their overall retention strategy. For BITS, offering a stipend to participants helps with attendance and with reaching target enrollment numbers. Partnering with a community organization makes this possible, reported Michele Masucci:

“We have 122 students this year, which is actually 130% of our target. We’re an inner-city project. All but one of our students are from underrepresented groups—Hispanic and African American students—and 53% are female, which is one of our goals. We were able to work with the Philadelphia Youth Network to enhance our incentive package. We have add-on funding that pays the students a pretty generous summer stipend allotment, and that made a big difference in terms of participation. That’s a standard for Philadelphia youth to be able to participate in a program. We’d have been disadvantaged in trying to retain students if we hadn’t been able to enhance the pay. The students get about \$500-\$600 per year.”

Other incentives mentioned by the speakers include covering public transportation costs and arranging school credit for students’ work.

Parting Words of Advice: Make it Fun!

Ultimately, no recruitment and retention strategies will be successful unless participants enjoy the program:

“It has to be really engaging. It can’t be ‘after-school school.’” ~Bonnie Styles

“Probably the most important thing is to make sure the programming is fun and interactive—make sure they have a good time.” ~Dan Calvert

About the Featured Projects

- Oregon Museum of Science and Industry’s **Salmon Camp Research Team** is an advanced technology and natural science career exposure and training program. It annually serves 180 reservation, rural, and urban secondary school students with Native American community affiliations.

- **The Museum Tech Academy** provides enrichment in archaeology, natural sciences, and information technology for 90 low-income Springfield-area students in grades 7 through 12. The program engages students in the full process of scientific research from problem formulation to the presentation of results.

- **Building IT Skills (BITS)** among Inner City Youth in North Philadelphia through Development of a Community Geographic Information System provides 90 at-risk high school students with instruction in information technology, spatial analysis, and cartographic and design skills through their creative involvement in developing a community-based GIS.

For more information, please visit the **ITEST Learning Resource Center Web site**:

www.edc.org/itestlrc

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