



Black Hawk College's [Highway Construction Careers Training Program](#) (HCCTP) offers students the opportunity to learn about the construction trades and prepare for apprenticeships. Read on to learn about three graduates' experiences.

These women have gone on from the program to work construction jobs in different trades, but they have this in common: all three recommend HCCTP and encourage other women to pursue construction careers.

The program aims to increase the number of minorities, women and disadvantaged individuals working on Illinois Department of Transportation highway construction projects. The class includes a mix of hands-on experiences and classroom work.

Jessica Johnson, HCCTP fall 2019 graduate

Jessica Johnson is a construction wireman at Tri-City Electric and on track to become an apprentice electrician in May 2021.



There are many job perks: Johnson loves the variety of work, being active all day and getting to spend time outdoors.

Other reasons she encourages women to consider construction jobs are the daytime work schedules and the compensation.

“That extra couple hours of sunlight is priceless,” she said. “The benefits are untouchable. The pay, untouchable.”

Johnson learned a lot while in HCCTP: math, concrete work, metalwork, woodwork, how to operate equipment, and about a variety of trades.

“It helped me decide which trade to join,” she said. “I was open to carpentry and HVAC, but it’s a big decision and I needed the resources to dig deeper into each trade. I know I chose the right path for me.”

She can’t remember how she heard about HCCTP, but she remembers her reaction as she read the description of the course: “Whoa, this is exactly what I need.”

Johnson recommends others sign up for the program to help them decide what trade to pursue and to get their foot in the door.

“Just having HCCTP on my résumé gave me an advantage, as the hall and local companies know the quality of workers they will get from this program,” she said.

Johnson also recommends other women consider careers in construction.

“We deserve the same income stability of men,” she said. “It’s hard work, sure, hard work that has built my character and made me a stronger person inside and out.”

Jenee Blackert, HCCTP fall 2018 graduate

Jenee Blackert is a laborer in Laborers Local 727 out of Dixon, a position she started in the summer of 2020.

She is in a three-year apprenticeship where she is learning more about concrete, asphalt, bridges, asbestos abatement and masonry when she isn’t on a job site.



“I love that a job like this is one where I will always be learning something new,” Blackert said.

HCCTP gave her the foundation she needed to continue her construction education. She already knows some of the material in many of her classes thanks to the program.

“HCCTP filled my personal toolbox literally and physically and gave me the knowledge and materials I needed to get into the trade,” she said.

It’s a serious program where you will get out of it what you put into it, Blackert said.

“The program sets you up with everything you need to know to be successful in whichever trade you choose, you just have to work hard and never give up to get to that next step,” she added.

Moments during HCCTP that Blackert will always remember are viewing a large part of Moline from a boom lift and spending fall days at Lake George working on the first phase of a boat ramp.

She also enjoyed working with Habitat for Humanity during the program. She learned how to do siding and how to prepare windows and doors with flashing tape then install them.

Blackert encourages women interested in construction to pursue opportunities, adding that many women are making a place for themselves as laborers, welders and machine operators.

“There are not many of us right now but that number is climbing,” she said.

Sabrina Duncan, HCCTP fall 2019 graduate

Sabrina Duncan is a first-year apprentice for Local 18 Cement Masons and Finishers and a member of Local 544 in Rock Island. She worked for Civil Constructors on the Hennepin bridge project from September 2020 through December 2020.



“My favorite part of the job was the view, being outdoors and working hard,” she said. “When it got tough I could stand up and look out to the river and take a deep breath, then get back to it. Seeing the progress of a day’s work is so rewarding!”

Duncan felt ready for her career thanks to HCCTP. The program manager stressed things like bringing extra layers of clothing and extra food to prepare for changing temperatures and longer shifts.

“HCCTP prepared me for the construction career by treating class like a construction job setting,” she said.

Duncan first heard about the program on the IDOT website. She had been interested in construction for years, but wasn’t sure how to get started. She immediately reached out to begin the application process, and she only wishes she had known about HCCTP sooner.

“The whole experience for me was a life changer and I wish I would’ve done it years ago,” she said.

Duncan said she learned a lot about various trades in HCCTP, and it was a great refresher for math and life skills. She also learned about tool and equipment basics, working in team settings, and safety, which instructors stressed.

For anyone wanting a job in construction, she recommends signing up for HCCTP and giving it your all. She said completing HCCTP gives you an advantage over someone who is just starting out.

Duncan said although the construction field only has a small percentage of women, construction is a good place to be. She was nervous at first and the work can be tough, but it is worth it.

“I wouldn’t give it up for the world,” she said.

Women in Construction Week is March 7-13. The [National Association of Women in Construction](#) (NAWIC) holds Women in Construction Week annually in March to promote women in construction.

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