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SUBJECT: Revised Case Study: Closing the Diversity Recruitment & Retention Gap for Federal Environmental Agencies

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Introduction: MobilizeGreen is a Washington, DC-based 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that focuses on building the next generation of diverse environmental and sustainability leaders. MobilizeGreen’s approach includes recruiting, training, and placing diverse college and graduate students, as well as recent graduates, in “green” internships with the intent of helping them convert these internships to green careers. MobilizeGreen’s mission is to “jumpstart green careers while advancing environmental equity in under-represented communities.”

This case study examines the reasons for MobilizeGreen’s standout success in the retention and professional advancement of the interns who participated in the 2014 MobilizeGreen-Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Direct Hire Authority (DHA) Resource Assistant Cohort Internship Program. MobilizeGreen had tremendous success converting diverse participants from these internships to jobs within the host agency. Currently, 90 percent of placed cohort members still work in the Federal government; 60 percent still work with the BLM; 30 percent work with other environment-related Federal agencies; and 10% work outside of the federal government and the environmental field. This case study examines the reasons for this powerful internship-to-job conversion ratio and retention with the aim of extracting insights useful in the design and program implementation as a roadmap for Federal agencies seeking to replicate the program’s success.

Host Agency for the Focal Internship Program: The host agency for the focal internship program was the United States (US) Department of Interior’s BLM. The mission of this agency is

“... to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America’s public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations” (US Department of Interior, 2014). The agency is responsible for over 245 million surface acres and 700 million acres of mineral resources. It manages these public resources for energy development, grazing, recreation, timber, and their unique natural, cultural, and historical resources. The BLM has approximately 10,000 employees. While the BLM has a budget of over \$1 billion, this agency’s resource management efforts generate sufficient revenue to cover its budget and generate an excess.

Policy Problems That This Internship Program Was Designed to Address: The BLM faced three inter-related challenges in ensuring a sufficient personnel pipeline, as follows:

1. BLM’s anticipated shortage of qualified applicants for mission-critical positions – At the time this internship program was established, the General Accounting Office was projecting that 30% of federal employees would be eligible to retire over the three subsequent years (Allen, 2014). At the same time, the US faced a shortfall in the number of college graduates compared to the number of job vacancies, with 1.5 million more jobs than graduates expected as of 2020 (Ray et al, 2012). Thus, the BLM needed to attract and retain an exceptionally large pipeline of new employees in a competitive market for entry-level employees and the agency’s recruitment process did not yield such a pipeline.
2. Limited and/or misaligned federal employment options for new college graduates – At that time, millennials made up only 7% percent of the federal workforce; yet the Office of Personnel Management projected that the US workforce as a whole would be half millennials within six years. This suggested that federal agencies needed to do something to attract this generation of workers into the federal sector for a healthy federal personnel pipeline. A pair of challenges confound this goal. One is the long and cumbersome federal hiring process. The other is a mismatch between particular job opportunities and the skills and/or geographic location of interested applicants (Ray et al, 2012).
3. A leadership gap between the composition of federal agencies’ professional workforce and the anticipated American workforce – The US is projected to be a “majority-minority country” by 2042. In 2014, people of color comprised slightly over one third (36.3%) of the US population; but 46% of children under 15 years of age at that time were youth of color (Allen, 2014). Thus, to effectively sustain the American workforce, federal agencies must develop a pipeline of well-trained young professionals who collectively reflect American rapidly changing demographic shifts.

Internship Program Design: MobilizeGreen helped design, conduct, and evaluate the 11-week MobilizeGreen-BLM Internship Program. This internship program was built upon the foundation of BLM’s Resource Assistant Program (RAP), which is governed by the Public Lands Corps Act of 1993, as amended ([16 U.S.C. §1721 et seq.](#)). The RAP seeks to develop a pipeline of diverse, qualified applicants who can fill a personnel gap anticipated as a result of anticipated

retirements. More specifically, the RAP objectives are to expose diverse college students to potential BLM careers; help BLM solve real-world, mission-critical challenges; and bring fresh, diverse perspectives to the agency.

The 2014 program recruited fifteen interns, matching their interests, majors, and competencies with occupations needed by the BLM and specific, outcome-based projects oriented toward solving real-world problems. The BLM designed and conducted an orientation training for the interns. MobilizeGreen personnel attended portions of the training to meet the interns and had various administrative tasks associated with the training such as evaluating the training.

During the internships, MobilizeGreen provided intern management services, including assisting interns with travel, housing, and logistics; managing payroll; providing liability insurance for interns; providing eligible interns with an AmeriCorps education award; providing BLM with biweekly reports on intern status, contributions, and experiences, along with developing a mechanism to collect these reports; providing professional development, career coaching, and networking opportunities; and coordinating with BLM on problem-solving and intern discipline if necessary. The outside administration of the program by a partner such as MobilizeGreen allowed the BLM to bypass Federal civil service and bureaucratic limitations.

Indicators of Success for the Focal Internship Program: MobilizeGreen and the BLM agreed on fifteen specific desired outcomes for MobilizeGreen's support for this cohort of interns. Selected highlights follow:

- ***Desired Outcome #1.a was to recruit and place ten qualified, motivated students from under-represented communities and minority-serving institutions in BLM internships.***
Achievements related to this desired outcome were as follows: Fifteen such students were placed in BLM internships; thirteen completed their internships, an 87 percent retention rate. Of the thirteen, eleven were eligible for a job conversion, nine accepted an agency job offer, one took a position as an environmental consultant in the private sector, and the other left but returned to work for BLM for a few years, before leaving again in 2017. Of the 10 who worked for the BLM, 70% are ethnically diverse, 100% identified as female, and over 60 percent had a STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics)-related degree. The conversion rate was remarkably high, due to the Directed Hiring Authority associated with this program and proactive marketing of the interns by BLM, MobilizeGreen, and the interns themselves. BLM calculated an 80% return on investment.
- ***Desired Outcome #1.b was to arrange intern assignments that reflect alignment between student interest, academic major, and/or course competencies with outcome-based projects and related occupational classifications provided by the BLM.***
Achievements related to this desired outcome as reflected in cohort feedback were as follows: MobilizeGreen brought BLM an outstanding cohort of interns whose interests,

majors, and course competencies were well-matched with the occupational series and projects that BLM sought to staff. The two exceptions to this theme included petroleum engineers and archaeologists. Recent graduates trained as petroleum engineers are likely to be over-qualified for technician-oriented positions; a unique recruiting strategy may be warranted for this occupational series. Conversely, opportunities in BLM's archaeology occupational series may require more experience than is reasonable to expect of an intern; and there was a mismatch between the Congressional mandate to emphasize recruiting at HBCUs and the schools that offer archaeology programs. With respect to occupational alignment, the BLM's human resources team pre-qualified each participant to a relevant occupational series to ensure successful job conversions.

- ***Desired Outcome #1.c was to ensure that interns could contribute to implementing team-based projects that solve real-world problems.*** Achievements related to this desired outcome as reflected in cohort feedback were as follows: the interns provided by MobilizeGreen made substantive, meaningful, and impressive contributions to BLM's mission. The only qualifiers to this theme were: a) the observation that BLM's priority archaeological projects would be better served if interns could stay longer than 11 weeks; and b) in one case, the project required a more experienced archaeologist rather than an intern. The pool of young people of color with significant experience in archaeology is relatively small; thus, the need for experience can be a "chicken and egg" type of barrier -- both for the intern candidates and for BLM in achieving a more diverse workforce. The key is for BLM to both begin its recruiting season much earlier in order to effectively compete for those candidates and to develop innovative talent pipeline initiatives that target diverse students in earlier years of their college.
- ***Desired Outcome #2.a was to recruit a pool of at least fifteen diverse individuals.*** Achievements related to this desired outcome were as follows: MobilizeGreen recruiting materials on its website and job boards received 2,399 views. These, along with direct outreach efforts, generated 190 applications, 37% of which were racially diverse (including African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and biracial individuals). Of the overall pool of applicants, 54% were female and 46% male. Applicants came from 41 different states and 119 academic institutions. MobilizeGreen presented BLM with a slate of eighteen candidates, 53% with STEM-related degrees. The strength of this pool was in large part due to active, targeted recruiting by MobilizeGreen, in a manner that reflected MobilizeGreen personnel's understanding of cultural outreach, credibility with young people of color, and personalized assistance in overcoming barriers.
- ***Desired Outcome #4.a was to maximize RAP success through management support to the interns and BLM.*** Achievements related to this desired outcome as reflected in cohort feedback were as follows: MobilizeGreen provided extensive, tailored support to each

intern and the interns as a cohort and was readily accessible to BLM and the interns. The intern support focused not only on professional development, but on assisting interns in adjusting to their assigned environments, ensuring their safety and wellbeing, and securing job placements following their internships. Interns particularly appreciated the professional development webinars.

Reasons for Success of the Focal Internship Program: Interviews with alumni of the focal internship program, as well as MobilizeGreen and BLM personnel, suggest five variables and processes that were primary contributors to the success of this program. These included:

1. Framing the program in a manner that directly contributed to the agency's strategic priorities.
2. The caliber of interns recruited by MobilizeGreen and relatedly, their work products.
3. An initial intern orientation training that equipped interns to "hit the ground running" when they arrived at their destinations.
4. MobilizeGreen's personalized and initiative-taking approach to supporting the intern cohort, site-specific teams, and individual interns; this encompassed support not only for their professional development, but also their safety, wellbeing, and adjustment to their new environments.
5. Proactive marketing of interns for agency jobs by the BLM, MobilizeGreen, and the interns themselves.
6. The direct hiring authority allowed the BLM to recruit talent for mission-critical positions noncompetitively, bypassing USAJobs.

Suggested Improvements for Future Internship Programs: While this program was a pilot, it was extremely successful. Feedback indicated two variables that could be improved for future such internship programs. These include: 1) Insufficient time for recruiting; and 2) the short program duration. A strong theme in the feedback indicated that the interns provided by MobilizeGreen were outstanding; at the same time, there were a few "fit" issues that would be less likely to occur if recruiting started earlier in the year and if BLM personnel were able to participate at key points in the recruitment process. In addition, some BLM supervisors expressed a preference for longer internships (e.g., 4-6 months). Their rationale was that this would provide more time beyond the normal adjustment period for interns to make headway on their projects.

In addition to the above two constraints, the program yielded a number of insights about ways to further enhance program design as Federal environmental agencies consider implementing different iterations of the program. The following recommendations are organized into the five categories, including: program design, recruiting, training, intern management, and program administration.

Program Design:

1. Consider lengthening the internship duration or offering an option for a longer internship.
2. Work to remove barriers for interns. This means including housing, transportation, travel, and other support, as well as professional development opportunities for interns. Many conservation and environmental internships take place on public lands located in rural areas, which areas typically lack diverse talent pools. Removal of barriers would make the program accessible to more participants from underserved communities.
3. Reach internal clarity regarding the diversity and developmental parameters on which recruiting should focus. For example, one BLM supervisor expressed the view that the program over-emphasized racial diversity, and that diverse experiential backgrounds should be equally valued. However, this was not the direction that MobilizeGreen received from the BLM project manager. This difference, along with experience requirements for recent graduates, can cause confusion that might be alleviated by either reaching internal agreement on the definition of “diversity” and the developmental nature of the program to clearly convey an agency’s goals for the program.
4. Build on the informal mentoring quality included in MobilizeGreen’s intern management approach by adding a formal mentoring component to the post-internship phase of the program to support “alumni” in succeeding once they convert their internships to jobs, particularly in light of the Office of Personal Management’s recent findings that retaining millennials in federal jobs is a challenge. This will help strengthen, enlarge, and retain a diverse talent pipeline for Federal agencies.

Recruiting:

1. Start recruiting much earlier in the year than occurred with the pilot year. For example, MobilizeGreen was told by a nationally renowned African American archaeology professor that the already tiny pool of top racially diverse candidates would all have jobs lined up by mid-March.

2. Engage in collaborative dialogue with partners and key stakeholders about where best to focus recruiting time for best results (e.g., diverse candidates who can succeed in jobs long-term).
3. Do more outreach to both “majority-serving” and “minority-serving institutions” with key academic programs, providing the recruiting partner the funding needed to do this in person.
4. Involve agency personnel at strategic points in recruitment process and consider recruiting a varied pool – both under the direct hire and non-direct hire -- so that agencies can develop a pipeline of as large a candidate pool as possible.
5. To the extent possible, factor in intern geographic preferences in making intern placements, including virtual and hybrid placements, to expand the candidate pool for diverse applicants.

Training:

Modify but do not eliminate the role of recruiting partner in intern orientation training and ongoing professional development webinars and other events. Current agency staff members may have the necessary in-house capacity to conduct the interns’ orientation (including providing technical training and information regarding the agency’s mission and history). However, engaging “alumni” and partners in the training design and implementation helps solidify the program implementation team, capitalize upon varied forms of expertise, and draw upon the invaluable insights of the alumni cohort – an excellent proxy for the target audience for the training.

Intern Management:

1. Coordinate an opportunity for each intern to “meet” his or her supervisor prior to arrival to ease anxieties about what lies ahead.
2. Build on the experience gained through the program to develop a list of administrative deliverables needed from the interns over the course of their internships, with specific due dates.

Program Administration:

1. Explore use of different legislative authorities and agreement vehicles to ensure flexibility for the partner and agency to accomplish programmatic goals.

2. Ensure budget accounts for the extensive front-end coaching that is necessary to help diverse students overcome structural, experiential, and cultural barriers they experience in finding employment with federal natural resource management agencies.

Implications for the Design of Internship Programs Beyond Public Lands Management

Agencies: In summary, implications for the design of other internship programs include:

- Closing skills gaps in mission-critical positions to ensure that agencies have a robust pipeline of new employees by:
 - Developing innovative talent pipeline initiatives that target diverse students in earlier years of their college; and
 - Aligning those initiatives with occupational series critical to the agency's mission
- Leveraging proven models and partnerships to ensure that program design and recruiting are done by entities that understand the cultures of the target population, have credibility with young people of color, and are committed and able to engage in proactive, targeted outreach and help young people of color overcome barriers of which others may be unaware.
- Framing internship programs in a manner that supports the agency's strategic priorities, skill needs, and work plans.
- Matching intern interests, majors, and competencies with:
 - Occupations needed by the sponsoring agency; and
 - Specific, outcome-based projects oriented toward solving real-world problems
- Ensuring that intern management services include:
 - Providing extensive, tailored support to each intern and the interns as a cohort (encompassing professional development but also attention to adjustment, safety, and wellbeing, and converting internships to jobs through proactive marketing of the interns to potential employers)
 - Being readily accessible to the sponsoring agency as well as to the interns
 - Providing interns with orientation training that enables them to "hit the ground running" once they get to their internship sites
- Using existing legal authorities such as the Public Lands Corps Act and Resource Assistant program (16 U.S.C. § 1721 et seq.) to test-drive talent, expose diverse talent to the sponsoring agency, and use direct hiring authorities (or a similar tool) to support conversion of internships to jobs where mission-critical openings justify bypassing USAJobs.com.

Conclusion. As can be seen in the preceding pages of this report, BLM and MobilizeGreen made the RAP a success with respect to their desired outcomes for this program. This multi-dimensional success is embodied in the following quote from an alumni of this cohort:

- *“MobilizeGreen has contributed immensely to my career goals. When I graduated from school I knew that I wanted to work for the BLM, however I was unable to make it through the HR processes and get hired. This internship allowed me a way in the door to work for the BLM and through the direct hire authority I [gained] a permanent position... I ...want to try to help other students who may be interested in public land management to be able to find a way into the government and to support them as they pursue their goals.” (Intern)*
- *“I spent 75-80% of my time toward the end marketing to managers on the interns’ behalf, and it really helped. Their resumes and transcripts were flawless, but some didn’t market themselves! Those interns who marketed themselves got jobs.” (MobilizeGreen)*
- *“This initiative allowed for concentrated establishment of a diversity-based program that was highly successful in its first year. Using the new Direct Hiring Authority, we achieved an 80% return on investment; we measure this as the percent of those interns who completed the program who went on to accept a job with BLM. BLM managers are now huge advocates for the program.” (BLM)*

References

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