

21ST CENTURY ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION PUTTING EQUITY AT THE TOP OF THE AGENDA

DRAFT The Environmental Workforce of the Future
Tuesday, December 13, 2022, 9:30-11:00am, Workshop

Participants

Leah Allen, Co-Founder & President, MobilizeGreen

Hadley Anthony, Graduate Student, AU School of Public Affairs

Michele Aquino, PhD Student, AU School of Public Affairs

Gordon Binder, Senior Fellow, World Wildlife Fund

Miller Elwood, Graduate Student, AU School of Public Affairs

Dan Fiorino, Director, Director, Center for Environmental Policy, American University

Joe Greenblott, Director, Analysis Division, Office of Planning, Analysis, and Accountability, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Julie Jones, Director of Employer Relations, American University Career Center

Marci McCoy Roth, Director, Interoperability and System Strategies, American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)

Stan Meiburg, Executive Director of the Center for Energy Environment & Sustainability, Wake Forest University

Vince Meldrum, Executive Director, Earth Force

Aaron Miles, Sr., Natural Resource Manager, Nez Perce Tribe

Danielle Miller Wagner, Program Director, Center for Environmental Policy, American University

Ruhan Nagra, Associate Professor & Founding Director of the Environmental Justice Clinic, University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law

Genna Reed, Director of Policy Analysis, Union of Concerned Scientists

Liz Romig, Director of Career Education and Outreach, AU Career Center

Jo Anne Shatkin, President, Vireo Advisors

Background

Practitioners were convened to review the research findings to date and make recommendations for how to prioritize and communicate about strengthening equity and fairness in environmental protection through the workforce. Read ahead materials and summary findings were provided in advance and can be found [here](#).

Discussion

Dan Fiorino opened the meeting by providing context for the research. Specifically:

1. *Key topics*: workforce development and technology.
2. *Key theme*: improving equity and fairness in environmental protection.
3. *Key questions for today*:
 - a. Who are the priority audiences for this material; how should we reach them?
 - b. What format should the deliverables take?
4. *1st year overview*: Big picture look, using scaled up model. Remote workshops done.
5. *2nd year overview*: Focused on in-depth analysis. Identifying opportunities to promote ideas in front of selected audiences. Some additional outreach to be done.

Stan Meiburg introduced the workforce topic and acknowledged that while much of the future of environmental workforce will reside in the private sector, our focus is on the public sector environmental workforce (Federal, State, Tribal, Local). He shared the following findings to date:

- a. Effective new hires must demonstrate both technical skills and people skills (soft skills) (i.e., emotional intelligence).
- b. Intentional new routes of recruitment are needed; OPM must broaden the scope of future workforce development:
 - i. Small-scale improvements have been seen – but still at model stage and not system wide.
 - ii. E.g., retaining interns and bringing them on board for full time employment after the internship—a good pipeline for new talent.
 - iii. More pathways to actual jobs must be prioritized with DEI as the focus.
 - iv. Retention is lacking – needs to be thought of upfront with intentional development opportunities.
- c. *Currently*: efforts to date have been sporadic and insufficiently resourced – EPA has been trying to improve outreach, which was not true at the start of the project.

Leah Allen of MobilizeGreen then shared some of the success stories of the Bureau of Land Management from her case study, [Closing the Diversity Recruitment and Retention Gap in Federal Agencies](#), which outlines the lessons from the 2014 MobilizeGreen-Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Direct Hire Authority (DHA) Resource Assistant Cohort Internship Program. MobilizeGreen stayed in touch with students for more than two years, most remain

employed with federal agencies (although not necessarily BLM). Build on soft skills, short term project-based model, and direct hire.

She also talked about the mission of MobilizeGreen – to jumpstart careers from underrepresented communities, and to ensure that individuals from the communities most impacted by climate change are involved in decision making. Specifically, MobilizeGreen removes the barriers for candidates through:

- 1) Helping youth of color get seen/tell their story to fed agencies
- 2) Making them competitive against experienced candidates who have done unpaid internships
- 3) Guiding them towards launching their careers

Leah shared some of the challenges of this work which includes the fact that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) do not necessarily offer the environmental science and studies programs that are required criteria under USAJobs. Also, federal environmental agencies are stuck in an old way of recruiting which is setting up tables at HBCU career fairs, but this approach has never really worked.

One example of success was the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) use of Public Land Corps Act. In this effort, BLM's project manager was very strong and creative and had a clear vision. She solicited projects from the field and managed the projects and brought in MobilizeGreen to do the recruiting in which diversity was a primary objective. In this 11-week program with 15 participants, ten were eligible for direct hiring and nine received and accepted an offer. Ninety percent of the hires were racially diverse.

Dan Fiorino offered that the Public Land Corps Act allows the Secretary of Interior to bring in interns for up to 11 weeks, and these interns can possibly be converted to direct hire. Leah Allen added that the use of direct hire is inequitable, not diverse. Agencies find ways around DEI and such, direct hire authority needs robust oversight.

Leah has seen some cases in which the full, effective model has been altered to a reduced form (e.g., current Forest Service process), and KPIs move in the wrong direction. Leah raised the importance of providing good mentors to new hires. She also raised the idea that direct hiring, while useful, can be inequitable and needs greater oversight. Hiring authority is there to help bypass some civil services processes, which can be an equitable outcomes limiter in some cases—if too much emphasis is placed on existing experience, there may often be an equity problem.

Vince Meldrum of Earth Force introduced his organization that combines civics with environmental activism and is built on the premise that by helping young people identify issues that they care about, they will get involved in environmental policy making. Further, by helping students engage with their local, state, or federal government agencies, they will view these organizations as part of the solution and work to engage with them at a young age. He shared the example of Calumet, Illinois, which faces underinvestment in waste and stormwater treatment. Students studied the issue and realized that just three miles away, the streets did not flood every time it rained. The students worked with a local alderman to try and divert rainwater away from

the overtaxed sewer system. When one student's home flooded with sewage, she was homeless for six months. After they leave Earth Force, students stay engaged in civic practices/policy making because they find a path to solving problems that they care about.

Genna Reed from the Union of Concerned Scientists highlighted their goal to increase diversity in the physical sciences and also to create a dashboard to view progress. One challenge to retention that she cited is the toxic work culture that can lead talented, diverse people to enter organizations but do not feel welcome in the organization, so they quickly move on.

A discussion ensued on how organizations can engage employees in real institutional change programming that embraces the latest thinking in DEI and about what "authenticity" looks like in this work. Feedback included the following suggestions: Serious commitments such as recruiting visits to marginalized communities, making sure the correct stakeholders are at the table. An example of this is EPA Administrator Michael Regan's "toxic tours" of communities impacted by toxic pollution.

Gordon Binder asked about what role we can play in changing the civil service hiring process with regard to technologies and human capabilities to be able to deal with big data and the systems needed to support those data. The group questioned whether EPA and other federal agencies have the ability to benefit from these resources.

Danielle Miller Wagner offered a summary on a case study that is focused on the Nez Perce tribe's ability to connect tribal youth through their internships and educational programs. The tribe has various agencies that provide opportunities to tribal youth to get involved in STEM based internships. A common theme among these internships is they are designed in a way that engages and promotes future interest in the STEM field. This is accomplished by making connections between Western science practices and cultural knowledge and methods. One challenge that the tribe faces is finding funding for their programs. Funding is not consistent and has limited the number of interns the tribe has been able to take.

Joseph Greenblott added to the discussion with an EPA perspective on how they try to promote diversity in their workforce. He said the EPA has not had major problems attracting diverse candidate pools. The challenge has been finding people with the proper experience for the higher-level positions. There is a lot of turnovers in his office which makes not only attracting, but retaining diverse candidates difficult. The current generation coming out of undergraduate programs appear to seek out more tangible impacts in their early career (whereas much of high-level federal EPA work is about long-term planning and navigating bureaucratic process).

His agency has created an environmental program on diverse rights, making it the first time having a national EJ office (in the office of the Administrator). The agency now goes beyond typical toxicological risk assessment and looks at cumulative impact with socio-economic/demographic considerations. He also noted that some younger candidates are not attracted to the typical bureaucratic processes along the very long EPA value chain between federal agency and fieldwork activities. The IRA has the opportunity to provide funding through "green banks". This would be funded through third parties and is still in the early stages of development.

Stan Meiburg mentioned agencies cannot achieve what is needed by themselves. There is an “expertise barrier” and structural barriers that limit how agencies can include diverse candidates. Connecting employees with projects they really care about can help them buy-in to work. It is important to support employees through strong mentorships. Agencies cannot just think about the objectives that get people in the door; they must ensure that the experience once someone joins an organization is positive (e.g., commitment to professional development). There is a need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation and adaptation.

Ruhan Nagra commented on the topic of: What is going on inter-generationally? Embedded beliefs in organizations are difficult to change. It becomes difficult to bridge differences when organizations have both existing, long-tenure staff meeting new generation workers. A discussion ensued on how to help diverse employees feel supported in bringing their identities and beliefs into the workforce. Feedback included using ongoing training to help older workers accept the differences that new employees bring. Remote working has brought many changes that have helped and hindered the process of including diverse candidates. Skill-based recruiting is increasing relative to credentialing emphasis. One issue for agency jobs is USA jobs website has implicit bias.

Aaron Miles, the Natural Resource Manager of the Nez Perce Tribe commented on the tribe’s internships and educational programs. He started by mentioning that the EPA is still learning how to respect tribal government. He mentions a feeling of disconnect between the environment and structure that EPA works in versus how the tribe operates. There are structural imposed limitations, and it is not a linear problem. Environmental fields are the most popular fields that tribal members seek. There is some difficulty for tribal members to get into these jobs because of the heavy science background that is required. However, Aaron gave examples of previous tribal employees that managed to obtain those jobs without having prior science knowledge and have exceeded in their positions.

Aaron’s goal is to start training Nez Perce tribal members to manage tribal operations. In the meantime, he is trying to hire nontribal members with a science background who can connect their knowledge to tribal significance. Youth and college aged students in the area have several higher education options to study environment-related subjects, but retention is a challenge.

Conclusions

After a productive meeting discussing the environmental workforce of the future, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Hiring barriers prevent applicants of color from being considered. There are not enough environmental policy and sciences courses offered at HBCUs, which almost immediately excludes candidates of color from consideration.
2. Direct Hire often fails to bring in a substantial number of employees of color. The process is inequitable and agencies often find ways around DEI initiatives.
3. Retention is one of the major failings of keeping and uplifting employees of color. Toxic work cultures lead folks to leave due to not feeling welcome or not having a path to grow their skills.

4. Generational differences make it difficult for younger employees to implement needed changes in organizations. Remote work versus an “in-office culture” represents a big divide between younger and older generations. In addition, some of the more long-term work done at environmental agencies lacks the urgency younger generations have with the climate crisis and being able to see results that positively affect their communities.
5. The “expertise barrier” affects applicants of color and many Tribal members. The heavy science background often means key roles in agencies are being filled by non-diverse candidates. These are structural issues that need to be fixed.

Recommendations

In addition to the conclusions gathered from the workforce workshop, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. Lifting up candidates of color to be competitive against experienced candidates who had the privilege to work unpaid internships. This means hiring applicants who might not have the exact science or policy background, such as where the Nez Pearce tribe hired applicants that excelled in roles that they would have otherwise been excluded from.
2. Replicate the Bureau of Land Management’s use of the Public Lands Corps Act that resulted in 9 out of 15 diverse candidates being hired.
3. Direct Hire needs robust oversight to ensure that it is being used to bring in diverse candidates, not sidestep the bureaucratic hiring process to bring in non-diverse candidates quicker.
4. Helping students engage with their local, state, or federal government agencies, can create a positive view of environmental organizations as part of the solution, and work to engage with them at a young age.
5. Recruiting visits to marginalized communities that also ensure the right stakeholders are at these meetings and events.