Stronger Investments in Leadership Programs will Diversify Environmental Justice Movement

Florence Sum
RAINIER VALLEY CORPS
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About Rainier Valley Corps

RVC strengthens the power of communities of color in order to create a more equitable society through capacity-building, leadership development, and operations support. We accomplish this through our core programs and services as well as through leading partnerships with community members and organizations of color. These members and organizations provide support services tailored to the strengths and needs of the communities they serve.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction  
2. Leadership Pathway Programs for Young Folks of Color  
3. What are the Current Environmental Justice Opportunities?  
4. Recommendations for Pathway Leadership Programs Targeting Leaders of Color in the Environmental Movement  
5. Why Environmentally-Focused Leadership Pathway Programs? Why now?  
6. What are the Outcomes? What Will Change?  
7. Models to Break the Green Ceiling  
8. Conclusion
**Introduction**

**DIVERSITY AND THE GREEN MOVEMENT**

Communities of color, especially lower-income communities of color and Indigenous folks, are disproportionately impacted by rapid urbanization in Seattle. Climate change, pollution, housing development (including availability of affordable housing), food access, transit access, and other factors often worsen existing health and economic disparities.

Yet, solutions spear-headed by the communities most impacted by health and economic disparities are rarely funded. Further, these communities are often the last to be included in processes that aim to work toward a healthy, resilient, and sustainable future for all. When it comes to addressing these issues, communities of color are often left out or are the last to be included in decision-making spaces and positions that wield influence.

In the summer of 2014, Dr. Dorceta E. Taylor released the Green 2.0 report. This report outlined the state of diversity in environmental organizations in the United States, looking at the demographic characteristics of their boards and staffs. Green 2.0 highlights that people of color are severely underrepresented in the environmental workforce. For example:

> “The percentage of ethnic minorities on the boards or general staff of environmental organizations does not exceed 16%. Once hired in environmental organizations, ethnic minorities are concentrated in the lower ranks. As a result, ethnic minorities occupy less than 12% of the leadership positions in the environmental organizations.”

The call for representation in environmental movement work is a decades-long cry. Yet, the investments from environmental institutions tend to exacerbate inequalities. Survey respondents from the Green 2.0 report “show an unwillingness to participate in needed initiatives to change the status quo.” Interest and support drop when these organizations were asked about efforts to change their organizational culture and their unconscious bias as a strategy for building a more diverse environmental workforce.

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The study also outlines that environmental organizations do not effectively use internship programs to recruit ethnic minority employees. More than 66% of the organizations in the study indicated that training programs for people of color and low-income residents should be developed, but less than 45% of the organizations would support such training programs. Existing programs rarely recruit, retain, and grow people of color to have policy, programmatic, executive-level leadership in the environmental and climate justice sector.

**QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE THE ‘GREEN CEILING’**

In order to accelerate leadership through fellowship and other pathway programs specific to those most affected by environmental and racial inequities to strengthen the diversity of the environmental movement, green organizations need to address all of the following “green ceiling” questions:

- Do we provide leaders with living wages?
- Do we bring in, retain, and grow people of color in environmental positions after hiring them?
- Does the education components of these opportunities center around communities of color, immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous folks’ history, work, and connection to the environmental movement?
- Do we actively shift organizational cultures to be equitable and inclusive of people of color?
- Do we prioritize learning and a chance to practice equitable practices and policies?
- Do the opportunities and organizations push for broader systems change with our participants and the broader social movement?
WHAT’S THE SEATTLE SCENE?

Seattle is transforming rapidly into a highly dense and wealthy city. The median income for family households hit $121,000 in 2017. This figure has increased by 22% since 2010, after adjusting for inflation. The city’s economic prosperity is physically changing the city, with rapid housing developments and commercial developments across and surrounding the city.

According to the report, The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations, “For decades, environmental organizations have stressed the value of diversity, however, the diversity composition has not broken the 16% green ceiling.” This is a nationwide issue, and Seattle is not an exception to this. Environmental organizations in the Pacific Northwest region are unsurprisingly white-dominated, especially in leadership positions and positions of influence.

STAFF DIVERSITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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In April 2016, in partnership with leaders from communities of color, the City of Seattle put forth the Equity & Environment Agenda, which contains recommendations from Seattle communities that are consistent with the Green 2.0 report.\(^6\) The Agenda details eight community-identified actions that have significant support from community members and need strong and bold leadership from government, philanthropy, community, and environmental organizations to address the complex environmental justice challenges in the region.

One of those actions is building career opportunities for communities of color to lead in the environmental movement. According to the same source,

“To build stronger pathways into careers in the environmental field for youth, programs must recruit in communities of color and partner with academic institutions such as community colleges to ensure that applicants have access to the training and certifications needed for specific internships. The city should lead by example with career opportunities, establish best practices for internships and fellowships that others can utilize, and use the Agenda to encourage environmental organizations and green businesses to develop living-wage paid internships and leadership opportunities.”\(^7\)

Environmental organizations play a pivotal role in advocating, influencing, and shaping our region to be more environmentally just. However, these organizations have historically been white-led. In this realm, the City of Seattle has not had created strong connections to communities of color and, more specifically, have not taken enough significant actions to create opportunities that prepare people of color to have policy, programmatic, and executive-level leadership opportunities in environmental and climate justice work. For example, policies rarely coordinate and leverage workforce development strategies to get results to the communities most impacted.

This is why it is urgent for more Indigenous folks, low-income/low-wealth communities, and communities of color to move into leadership positions now. People of color-led organizations, including Got Green, Puget Sound Sage, Na’ah Illahee Fund, Duwamish River Clean-Up Coalition, Front and Centered, Environmental Coalition of South Seattle, and others, have been doing vital work advancing environmental justice. However, these organizations are not provided sufficient resources to tackle all environmental justice issues or to drastically change policies and systems on behalf of communities of color, Indigenous folks, immigrants, and refugee populations.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Individual, cultural, systemic, and institutional barriers all contribute to slow progress in building diversity, equity, and inclusion within environmental organizations. The current status quo experienced by environmental professionals of color in the sector is summarized thusly:

1. **Systemic Racism; Structural and Institutional Oppression**

   Generational poverty, displacement, housing discrimination, over-policing, historical erasure, capitalistic definitions of value and worth, historical racism, racial biases, and colonialist mentalities, and other factors have systematically and historically kept people of color from accessing education, meaningful employment, economic stability, growth, and wealth.

   According to a report conducted by a consulting firm, Equity Matters NW, hired for the City of Seattle Equity & Environment Initiative Community Partners Steering Committee, 62% of those surveyed believe systemic racism is one of the top three root causes of the current lack of equitable paths to jobs with living wages and senior-level green jobs for people of color, immigrants, and refugees.

   A convening of environmental professionals of color on March 31, 2016, facilitated by Lylianna Allala and cited in her report, Breaking the Green Ceiling: Empowering People of Color in the Environmental Sector, found that participants cited institutionalized and structural oppression as the number one root cause of lack of living wage jobs in the environmental sector for people of color.

2. **Lack of Access to Education and Job Training**

   Positions in the environmental sector often list entry- and mid-career level positions as requiring high-level certifications or a bachelor’s/master’s degrees, as well as at least 3 to 5 years of relevant work experience. These jobs are often not accessible to historically underrepresented populations, especially those who are young, low-income, from communities of color, immigrants, refugees, or Indigenous folks.

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3. **Lack of Funding, Investment, and Resources in Communities of Color**

There are a high number of organizations in Seattle led by people of color, Indigenous folks, and immigrants and refugees, but these organizations lack the funding, trust from large institutions, and support to fully tackle environmental justice issues and create space for people of color to move into positions of leadership. **About 90% of philanthropic dollars across the sector go to white-led organizations.**

4. **Uninviting and Exclusive Organizational and Environmental Movement Culture**

There is a lack of prioritization of issues that affect people of color, immigrant and refugee communities, and Indigenous folks by mainstream environmental organizations and policymakers. In addition, there is a lack of action-based investment in culture change to integrate racial equity within the workplace. Both of these things contribute to a pervasive dominant culture to who can advance, who can decide, and what’s important.

5. **Lack of Knowledge among Mainstream Orgs about How to Diversify**

Many environmental organizations admit they have a diversity issue and want to rectify the issue, but they do not know how to do it, as they do not have diverse internal staff or key staff members with the right positional power, such as human resources directors, the executive director, or the operations director to guide the effort, leading to chicken-and-egg barriers.

When people of color are included and invested into the workforce, there are positive results. The City of Seattle’s Equity and Environment Agenda outlined the need and benefit for historically white-led environmental organizations’ lens to have a greater complexity and more focus on diversity and equity: “Given the tendency to filter information through one’s own experiences, there is a need to continue to develop historically white-led organizations, and government lenses to align with communities of color.”

In addition, studies have shown that diverse teams are smarter, solve problems faster, and organizations perform better financially. People of color have the gifts, power, experience, and knowledge to do the work, and when we invest in their leadership and their power, our world will be more healthy, resilient, and sustainable.

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Leadership Pathway Programs for Young Folks of Color

BARRIERS PREVENTING YOUNG FOLKS OF COLOR FROM ENTERING THE SECTOR

For low-income individuals or those who are of color, opportunities for career advancement in the environmental movement are hard to come by. Workers with less experience or who are from nontraditional backgrounds, especially, are often exploited in low-wage positions and/or are subjected to excessive work.15 Many people get stuck in a cycle of working multiple jobs to survive rather than to thrive. People from historically marginalized communities may have to live paycheck to paycheck, making it incredibly difficult to break out of the cycle of poverty and the associated intersecting oppressions.

The lack of representation in environmental work would benefit from committed equity strategies, not just diversity strategies. Communities most impacted by environmental changes must be at the front lines of the work and at the center of decision-making processes at the local and national level. With the effects of climate change intensifying every year, it’s important to continue to shift away from extractive systems and into sustainability practices. There needs to be more meaningful investments in the professional development of people of color in the environmental sector now.

When marginalized people are denied a seat at the table, a new cycle of institutionalized environmental racism is perpetuated. We must focus on young adults of color because they have a higher rate of unemployment when compared to young white adults, and young adults of color are more often exploited as cheap and temporary labor.16

This employment trap removes youth of color from future employment opportunities. Even when the education gap is accounted for, young people of color still are underrepresented in green careers. Notably, while many green jobs only require a high school diploma, many of these positions require an apprenticeship or certification that people of color do not have access to.

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CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG FOLKS OF COLOR IN THE SECTOR

The best way to develop authentic sustainability in the fight against climate change is to invest in young, early career individuals, as well as building up existing leaders in the field. Cultivating young leadership is important, because young leaders stand to have many years growing along with their organizations, bringing their unique expertise and community-centric perspectives. This kind of leadership can be accelerated through leadership-building fellowships and other pathway models specific to those most affected by environmental and racial inequities, to break the green ceiling in the environmental movement.

Employment opportunities, including internships, fellowships, and other entry-level positions, need to apply a green jobs framework. Green jobs, as defined by communities of color-led environmental justice organization Got Green, are “jobs that benefit or conserve the environment, provide a living wage, and preserve or expand environmental health for workers and the surrounding community.”

A diverse workforce is necessary to properly tackle complex environmental justice issues. Despite the oft-stated organizational benefits of having a diverse workforce, the environmental field remains white-dominant. Increasing people of color in the environmental field would increase the number of viable solutions that will ultimately benefit all of us on this planet.

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What are the Current Environmental Justice Opportunities?

The call for job opportunities that foster career longevity in the green sector is urgent and important, but what also needs to be considered is tackling organizational culture and broadening the mindsets of current leaders and supporters in the green sector — to challenge the status quo models of white-centric decision-making. A workforce development strategy must also be integrated with strategies that shift organizational culture in the environmental sector. Otherwise, equity and inclusion strategies are just empty gestures.

In analyzing existing environmentally-focused fellowships in the Greater Seattle area and nationally for their strengths, gaps, whether they are reaching and retaining POC candidates and employees, and whether they are building environmental leadership, we discovered that out of the 28 opportunities in Seattle (see appendix A), there are very few environmentally-focused fellowships or opportunities solely focused on recruiting, retaining, and growing people for leadership. It’s also rare to see an opportunity that provides a living wage, professional growth opportunities, and an investment in organizations to shift their culture to be more equitable to and inclusive of people of color. All three strategies must be simultaneously present to significantly shift the environmental sector to better serve those who are most impacted by climate change.

Nationally, we found several opportunities that aimed to bring more representation and leadership from communities of color into the environmental sector, specifically the Ray Conservation Fellowship, New Urban Mechanics Fellowship, Compass Point, Green Corps, University of Michigan’s Environmental Fellows, Urban Sustainability Directors Network Equity Diversity Inclusion Fellowship Program, Student Conservation Association Sustainability Fellows, Nathan Cummings Foundation Inequality Fellowship, Corps Network Moving Forward Initiative, Castanea Fellowship, and Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program.
THE STRENGTH OF THESE PROGRAMS

What’s clear for all opportunities crafted to expose people to the environmental sector is that participants in these programs are learning about the environment, developing some skills, fostering connections to like-minded individuals and professionals, and are compensated for their participation in some way.

Leadership development
Fellowships and internships, by definition, constructed opportunities for individuals to learn about themselves and the work, which should also include mentorship, training, room to make mistakes, give feedback, grow, and, most importantly, thrive. All the available opportunities from appendix A provide learning spaces, and they prioritize opportunities for their fellows to learn about the environmental sector and to grow as leaders.

Fostering connections between program participants and professionals in the field
It’s important for any professional at any point in their career to create connections across similarly experienced people and those beyond.

Exposure to and increase in understanding of environmental issues
Whether it’s about conservation, climate change, water quality, sustainability, pollution, land waste, or land rights, most of the opportunities include an educational component, for fellows to learn from their peers and about environmental issues and how they impact the surrounding communities and beyond.

Compensation
Most opportunities compensate participants in some way, whether that’s institutionalizing a sliding scale access fee, providing a stipend, or ensuring there is food and childcare available. These are important ways to reduce barriers that people of color face in participating in these types of learning opportunities.
THE GAPS

Each opportunity is structured differently because of different methodologies, pedagogies, and targeted populations. Many organizations’ goals for their individual programs were not explicitly focused on reaching and retaining people of color for environmental leadership. Here are some common gaps in many existing opportunities:

Programs offer only low compensation

Many opportunities provide minimal compensation, which would make sense if the program is short-term and requires only attending occasional trainings. But if positions involve at least a part-time to full-time commitment, anything short of a living wage (for the City of Seattle) is inequitable, and it reinforces the notion that only people with privilege can participate in environmental justice as a viable career. Low-wage jobs, especially disadvantage low-income communities, people of color, refugees, immigrants, and Indigenous folks who, on average, are compensated less than their white counterparts across all sectors.

Programs reinforced green ceiling

Opportunities that do not prioritize moving and retaining people of color in meaningful positions, from internship/fellowship to mid-career to senior leadership, reinforce the exclusive ‘green insiders’ club. Meaningful positions are those that pay a living wage, involve ownership of work, and provide the opportunity to influence and make impactful decisions in environmental justice, within and outside of the organization. If we do not shift how power is held and distributed in organizations, then we will continue to see people of color concentrated only in entry-level or mid-career positions.

Opportunities that require formal education is an inequitable strategy for breaking the green ceiling. When we consider cost, accessibility and retention issues, and the learning structures of formal education, formal education becomes a significant barrier for members of marginalized communities to achieve leadership positions. Entry-level and mid-career folks of color who have worked in the environmental sector for years, building connections to the community and effectively executing the responsibilities without degrees for years, often suddenly finding themselves with no advancement opportunities after a certain point, because they lack a formal degree.

Most opportunities note supporting participants in finding a career in the environmental sector. However, very few of the opportunities are meant to result in permanent jobs at host organizations, and very few host organizations take the time and effort to truly connect fellows to the next job or to a paid fellowship. For example, career-oriented living wage internships at the college and graduate level in city government were predominantly held by young white males, while Asian/Pacific Islanders held 29%, African American/Black held 9%, and Native American/Alaska Native held less than 1%.19

Placement Sites / Organizations are not prepared culturally for POC employees
A strong workplace environment is critical to retaining employees of color, and this is one of the most difficult things to manage and change. A new study by Future Workplace and Kronos found that 87% of employers said that improving retention is a critical priority for their organization.20 Part of the strategy is to improve their work environment because this can be the determining factor in someone staying in or leaving their jobs. For employees of color, it is important for the workplace culture to be inclusive and transformational, or they will continue exiting out the revolving door.

Programs are too short (1 year or less)
Short programs are not inherently bad, but if the intention is to transform organizational culture to include an equity strategy, it takes longer than a year.

In addition, it takes at least a year for a leader to get their bearings before they can confidently make a larger impact outside of immediate job responsibilities. If we are to change the status quo of environmental leadership, programs need to address ways in which short-term projects or internships do or don’t determine whether people have a job or not afterward with the organization.

Short-term internships and programs also are subject to implicit bias in the hiring process, especially if the opportunity is entry-level. High expectations of a quality performance in a short time does not allow prospective applicants much room to make mistakes and improve. If one needed to determine whether an intern or fellow was “worth” hiring on after, everyone would benefit from a longer internship to evaluate performance, receive and implement feedback, and grow.

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Programs are network-only focused

Building the network of an environmental professional can be impactful for building partnerships for collaborative work on environmental justice, which can be incredibly meaningful. However, programs that are only network-focused are limiting because the same programs typically do not build diverse leadership within an individual's organization, which does not change the lack of representation in the environmental justice movement for the better, nor does it change the culture of an organization to be more inclusive or equitable.

Programs focused on direct service work only, not systemic change

Many existing programs are focused on providing direct services, such as weatherizing windows, neighborhood cleanups, building community gardens, and others. While these are critical programs that provide countless benefits to communities of color, there is a need to integrate these services with advocacy and systems change work, especially when grounded in values of equity and social justice.

Programs offer environmental justice curriculum without focusing on Indigenous history and contributions

The listed opportunities rarely have curriculum that focus on including and centering around Indigenous communities and the history of the land we have settled on and continue to occupy. Outside of acknowledging the name of the land in our region, we barely see any workshops or teachings on environmental justice that intersects or focuses on Indigenous folks' work, history, leaders, or communities. (Any work centered around this needs to be specific to the region in which environmental work is done.)

ARE CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES BUILDING ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP?

It's unclear how successful these fellowship programs are in retaining and growing people of color in environmental leadership. There isn’t clear data showing how these programs are leveraged by existing historically white-led environmental organizations to identify, hire, retain, and grow people of color who graduate from these programs.

What is clear is the environmental sector is still predominantly led and populated by white folks, even though people of color have tried to engage in the work. What we often heard through our research and conversations with professionals of color is that many have tried entering into environmental justice work, only to leave it after burning out or feeling disillusioned by the sector.
Recommendations for Pathway Leadership Programs Targeting Leaders of Color in the Environmental Movement

A stronger investment in leadership programs that focus on recruiting and supporting leaders of color is critical to the success of the environmental movement, as this sector’s ethnic, racial, and cultural makeup should more accurately reflect the general population. As our society diversifies, the green movement is at risk of becoming less and less relevant if it does not also diversify. Leadership pathway programs, such as fellowships and internships supporting both entry-level and mid-career POCs, are pivotal.

However, these programs should build on the current strengths of the sector, address its weaknesses, as well as:

- Be grounded in racial equity, including Native/Indigenous history and rights, and include thorough examinations of the lasting impact of U.S. colonization
- Strategically recruit and target POCs
- Have curricula that comprise education around cultural elements such as historic trauma, intergenerational dynamics, gender differences, disability and health inclusion, religious differences, and more.
- Provide living wages to program participants or significant compensation
- Have it be at least two years in duration
- Remove unnecessary barriers that disproportionately affect POCs, such as formal education requirements and lack of criminal record requirements, unless relevant
- Support participants in both direct services work as well as in affecting systemic change
- Provide mentorship and career coaching for participants
- Simultaneously support host sites in developing and strengthening equity practices
- Place two or more participants at the same sites to provide mutual support, if possible
Why Environmentally-Focused Leadership Pathway Programs? Why now?

“Creating pathways for young leaders of color to attain jobs within the green economic movement is essential. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2043, people of color will grow from 36 percent to 50 percent of the U.S population. Youth in the U.S. will be over 50 percent people of color by 2019, according to the Brookings Institute. Without active engagement with communities of color, the environmental movement as it stands will become irrelevant. The time is now to strategize on how we can support youth from communities of color and low-income communities to become the leaders that will take us into a new era.”

— Lylianna Allala, Environmental Professionals of Color Seattle

Our workforce demands more leadership from communities of color, Indigenous folks, immigrants and refugees, and low-income communities, especially in the green sector. There is a growing gap between available skilled workers and available jobs due to economic expansion and retiring baby boomers. Organizations like Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) will also experience this same gap. SPU is working to address this by changing how they recruit for internships, shifting human resource strategies, and more. This is a good step for the City of Seattle, however, we cannot solely rely on our city government to create green careers for people of color. We need cross-sector investment, whether through organizations that create an internal ladder or through partnership programs.

The Environmental Professionals of Color (EPOC) Seattle facilitated a workshop in 2016 to come up with community-based solutions to inspire and make an equitable change towards inclusive workplace culture and career pathways for people of color in the environmental field. This workshop was conducted in partnership with the Environmental Leaders Program and the Seattle’s Equity and Environment Initiative.

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The result of this workshop listed barriers consistent with the ones listed in this paper and the change environmental professionals of color seek are two-fold:

1. Invest in equitable and competitively paid learning opportunities for people of color, immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous folks to build environmental leadership at all levels of the career track.

2. Shift environmental, organizational culture to include an equity framework.24

Several local Seattle organizations recognized the need for an environmentally-focused fellowship and have pushed for further discussion and/or development of a program.

Brainerd Foundation launched the Mid-Career Institute for Environmental Leaders (MiEL), a 5-day residential program for environmental leaders in the Northwest to develop the skills and perspectives needed to assume larger leadership roles in their respective organizations.

The Washington Environmental Council and the Washington Conservation Voters assessed the existing opportunities of Seattle in 2017 and discussed at length about their capacity and positionality to start a fellowship program. They ended up steering away from the fellowship model due to capacity and decided to invest in their internship model.

There’s momentum, and this is a critical moment for more investment to build and grow leaders of color in this sector.

If we invest in an environmentally-focused fellowship program targeted at communities of color, especially low-income and Indigenous folks, we are challenging the status quo of who typically has access to leadership positions in this sector, who has the loudest voice, and who gets to speak on behalf of their communities. If we invest in an environmentally-focused fellowship program, we would extend career-track internships/fellowships to a more diverse population and ensure a significant shift in the leadership of the environmental movement. We will be crystallizing the efforts of previous leaders and community members who’ve asked for an opportunity to launch their careers into and up in the environmental sector.

What are the Outcomes? What will Change?

The overarching vision and goals of an environmentally-focused fellowship program are:

1. Ensuring people of color are equally represented, engaged, and influential in the green sector.
2. More community needs are met more effectively and equitably in the environmental justice movement (specifically the needs of low-income communities, communities of color, and Indigenous folks).
3. The communities leadership “bench” is broader and stronger.

Below, you will find more outlined outcomes and goals a fellowship program should aim to accomplish:

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<th>FELLOWS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cohort</strong></td>
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<td>Fellows form strong relationships as a cohort and individually to one another.</td>
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<th>PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cohort</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizations have addressed their targeted equity and capacity-building (via fellow[s] and supervisors) as identified in an organizational equity assessment.</td>
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The overarching framework of the impacts we want to see can be explained by the Network Theory. Fellows will be seeded at different organizations across Seattle, and create relationships within the organization and their greater networks. They will also create an informal peer support network to effect change across an array of organizations.

In essence, the seeds of change in these different places will grow and connect to create a broader system of change. New networks will continue to emerge and work with one another from these seeds.
Models to Break the Green Ceiling

The proposed fellowship models we are presenting below seek to address the issues previously discussed in this report as well as uplift the recommendations listed in the Green 2.0 report, Got Green’s Breaking the Green Ceiling report, the City of Seattle Community Partners Steering Committee of the Equity & Environmental Agenda, the Environmental Leadership Program’s Breaking the Green Ceiling report, the Brainerd Foundation’s The Next Generation of Environmental Leaders: Opportunities for Investment and Action in the Northwest report, and Got Green’s Young Worker report.

MODEL 1: ENTRY-LEVEL FELLOWSHIP MODEL

An entry-level fellowship, with an intersectional lens (environmental, economic, and racial justice), that prioritizes candidates from traditionally marginalized communities of color would be pivotal in increasing the influence of voices of color in the environmental justice movement.

RVC is launching the Green Pathways Fellowship Program, which is similarly structured to their successful Community Impact Fellowship Program.

This program would provide leadership development training and instill a multi-faceted approach in supporting young folks, through meaningful living-wage work in the green sector at the entry point, which will give way to a career pathway all the way to leadership roles.

The Green Pathways Fellowship Program will recruit POCs and hire them in partnership with host sites for two-year placements.

Before being immersed in host organizations, fellows will be trained. They will participate in an opening retreat to develop group dynamics and

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establish strong relationships and trust between fellows and their host site members. Fellows will be supported in a 5-week Leadership Academy, where they learn leadership skills as well as professional skills to be successful working in the environmental sector.

After the Leadership Academy, fellows start working full-time at their host sites, and they will continue benefiting from guidance and mentorship throughout their fellowship. They will work in pairs to ensure maximum support, learning, and opportunities for reflection. Throughout the year, fellows will engage in monthly all-day trainings and lunch and learn meetings for check-ins, peer-coaching, and networking opportunities with community leaders. There will be a mid-year retreat and an end-of-year celebration. Fellows will undergo performance evaluation twice during the year.

Host partners will provide fellows a living wage, health insurance, a professional development stipend, and a technical equipment stipend. Host partners will agree to attend regular trainings on supervision and other relevant topics. In addition, host partners have agreed to work with an RVC capacity-building coach to complete an equity assessment and implement recommendations. This is a benefit not many other environmental opportunities aimed at increasing POCs in the sector include. Host partners will also have access to a peer network, coaching, and education to support their fellow, staff, organization, and the overall green movement.
MODEL 2: MID-CAREER & SENIOR FELLOWSHIP MODEL

People of color involved in decision-making roles are critical to significantly shifting how environmental justice operates, who it serves most, how organizations integrate equity, and what the environmental workforce looks like. POCs in the environmental justice movement cited a green ceiling, or a barrier to vertical professional advancement, from mid-career positions to senior-level positions.27 This green ceiling also makes it difficult for new talent to enter the sector, especially young professionals.28 To address this, we have two recommendations:

1. **Become a host site for a mid-career fellowship.**

   Most POCs who work in environmental justice cite they are only able to move their careers laterally, jumping from organization to organization, since they are unable to move up within their one organization. These folks have to apply to other organizations to find meaningful work. It is crucial to launch folks into mid-career positions and build the skills to manage, supervise, seek funding, and more.

   For a mid-career fellowship, all fellows should be trained in at least a 2-week onboarding process. The first week will be an opening retreat to develop group dynamics, support channels, and establish strong relationships, trust, and accountability between fellows and host organizations. The second week will support the fellows with a curriculum to develop leadership skills specific to a mid-career pathway. **A good example of a week-long institute to model is the Propel Leadership Institute at the University of Washington, a week-long training for mid-career environmental leaders.** After the two-week period, fellows will start working full-time and continue to be supported by a mentor and a coach throughout their fellowship.

   Host organizations will provide fellows a living wage, health insurance, a professional development stipend, and a technical equipment stipend. Host organizations will agree to attend regular trainings on supervision and any other relevant topics. In addition, host organizations agree to a climate and equity assessment and implement recommendations. It’s important for host organizations to continuously assess their work climate and structure to improve equitable practices and policies which impact the retention and growth of leaders of color.

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2. **Pay a practicum student from a university partnership a living wage or host an intern.**

   A practicum is a great opportunity for students to enter and grow in the environmental sector, because the university partnership has similar benefits specifically with on-site training with community organizations and through the university. The caveat is that this opportunity does only benefit individuals who are able to access and stay in academic institutions and this structure.

   Practicum students will be onboarded by the host organizations as a staff member, be presented with the same opportunities to inform the organization’s strategic direction, participate in staff retreats, and meet with key staff members and stakeholders to understand the history and state of the organization. Host organizations will provide fellows a living wage, health insurance or stipend, and a professional development stipend.
## Conclusion

Our political climate and environment demand and need communities of color to be at the front and center of the environmental justice movement. Across the United States, race is the most significant predictor of who is living near contaminated air, water, or soil. The impact on low-income and communities of color when it comes to climate change is disproportionate, with these communities getting hit harder than their white counterparts. This disparity often go unaddressed because of a green ceiling: those who are most impacted are underrepresented in environmental agencies and environmental government entities. This is a challenge across the nation. Primarily white, upper-income communities shape and benefit from environmental policies, approaches, and incomes. If we want these outcomes to change, we need an equity strategy, not a diversity approach.

This report culls together recommendations made by other POC environmental justice researchers in the field, City of Seattle's Environmental Justice Committee, and local Seattle-based POC-led, community-based organizations.

What we’ve repeatedly read and heard from POCs is that the environmental justice movement should be more strategic in recruiting POCs as well as remove barriers that disproportionately affect POCs, such as formal education requirements and lack of criminal record requirements, unless relevant. We also were told by multiple sources that, in a fellowship model, beyond providing mentorship and coaching, curricula for POC employees at environmental justice organizations must comprise education around historic trauma, intergenerational dynamics, gender differences, disability and health inclusion, religious differences, and more.

In order to change the sector and address inequity in terms of career access and career longevity in the environmental sector for POCs, a stronger investment in leadership programs that focus on recruiting and supporting leaders of color is critical.

---

# Appendix A: Seattle Environmental Opportunities Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>POC led &amp; serving organization?</th>
<th>&gt; 1 year?</th>
<th>Comp?</th>
<th>College req?</th>
<th>King County living wage?</th>
<th>Environmental education center communities most impacted?</th>
<th>Enter, retain, and grow POC in environmental jobs?</th>
<th>Shift org culture towards the arc of equity internally &amp; host sites?</th>
<th>Learning &amp; work opportunity?</th>
<th>Systems change component?</th>
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- **Y** Yes, the program/organization meets this standard fully.
- **Y*** Yes, with the condition, the organization is currently working on this and partially meets this standard.
- **N** No, the program/organization does not meet this standard.
- **N*** No, either there is imperfect data or the design or goal of the program wasn’t meant to meet this standard.
About Rainier Valley Corps

Rainier Valley Corps (RVC) strengthens the power of communities of color in order to create a more equitable society through capacity-building, leadership development, and operations support. We accomplish this through our core programs and services as well as through leading partnerships with community members and organizations of color. These members and organizations provide support services tailored to the strengths and needs of the communities they serve.

FIND US

1225 S. Weller St.
Suite #400
Seattle, WA 98144
206-436-9536
rainiervalleycorps.org