



National Council on Electricity Policy

NCEP Collaboration Brief: Partnerships between State Government Agencies and Higher Education Institutions to Support Recruitment



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July 2024*



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Acknowledgments

This report was written by Sarah Fitzpatrick and Hyleah O'Quinn of NARUC CPI and is based on work supported by the U.S. Department of Energy Grid Deployment Office under Award Number DE-OE0000925.

The authors wish to thank the following individuals for contributing their time and expertise to the development of this paper.

- **Kim Biggs**, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
- **Talita Elizeu**, Govern For America
- **Hon. Sarah Freeman**, Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission
- **Susan Hamm**, U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy
- **Annika Harper**, U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy
- **Ashley Harrison**, Virginia State Corporation Commission
- **Molly Lamb**, University of Illinois-Springfield
- **Daniel Lauf**, National Governor's Association
- **Whitney Mays**, Virginia State Corporation Commission
- **Ronald Phillips**, Texas Tech University
- **Danielle Sass** Byrnett, NARUC
- **Pam Smith**, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
- **Stacey Washington**, South Carolina Energy Office

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Introduction

Across the public sector, state government entities have increasingly been struggling to retain employees and then fill employment gaps. A variety of factors are responsible for this challenge, including retirements of long-standing public servants that remove capacity and institutional knowledge, competition for workers from the private and nonprofit sectors, perceptions of government work, and various limitations in hiring that can be uniquely related to public service, such as limited publicity about available positions, lack of plain-language job descriptions, noncompetitive compensation, inflexibility with geographic requirements, among other causes. Recognizing this need, state agencies, institutions, and supportive organizations have applied various strategies to address challenges and fill vacancies.

Higher education institutions are dedicated to providing education to young adults and preparing students to lead and contribute to society. Public institutions often also have missions and values centered around public service, as they are typically funded by their respective state governments. While all higher education institutions dedicate resources to helping students seek and secure employment after graduation, some institutions include a focus on employment opportunities in the public sector. Educational institutions that partner with public sector agencies often do so to provide experiential learning opportunities in public service to students, involve students in policymaking, and enhance students' leadership potential. These types of programs strengthen relationships that universities have with their state government and with the students that participate.

This collaboration brief highlights partnerships between state government agencies and higher education institutions to identify and attract diverse talent—particularly recent graduates and early career professionals—into public sector work. These partnerships fall into three major categories: direct partnerships, which are documented in formal agreements and partnerships between state agencies and higher education institutions; third-party partnerships, which encompass entities outside of state agencies and outside of universities who facilitate recruitment and employment across both types of organizations; and open-ended partnerships, which include more informal, ad hoc partnerships between states and universities that often change when staff change.

Research and interviews conducted for this brief illuminate some of the overarching challenges of workforce recruitment in the public sector and provide case study examples of partnerships that have been increasing the interest, number of applications, and employment numbers in public sector agencies from recent graduates and early career professionals. The brief describes how each partnership is structured, its main keys to success, and where there have been challenges, as well as unique aspects of each partnership. The intent is to provide examples of collaboration and partnership for other state agencies to consider adapting to meet their needs.

Summary: Strategies to Increase Public Sector Recruitment Success

Based on research and interviews, state government agencies might consider the following strategies when looking to recruit recent graduates and/or partner with in-state universities for recruitment:

- Research whether universities in your state have direct partnership programs similar to University of Illinois-Springfield's (UIS) Graduate Public Service Internship (GPSI) or Texas Tech University's (TTU) Government and Public Service Internship Program (see pages 9 to 11).
- Research if your agency is eligible for internship or fellowship placement programs such as Govern For America's (GFA) Fellowship Program or DOE's Clean Energy Innovator Fellowship (CEIF; see pages 12 to 14).
- Bring current employees who have recently graduated to career fairs so students can speak to colleagues of a similar age and with recent experience in the job search process.
- Participate in topic-specific career fairs where agency needs are the most pronounced. For example, if there is a need for engineers or other Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)-focused positions, participate in STEM career fairs or career fairs in engineering graduate schools.
- Consider setting up an ambassador program in your agency to determine staff comfort with recruitment or mentorship opportunities for interns or new hires. Some staff may be comfortable with in-person recruitment activities, others with virtual activities, and yet others with one-on-one engagement or mentorship.
- Identify key university staff who work in recruitment or organize career fairs. A good place to begin is to check with contacts at university career centers.
- Use social media to advertise open positions or internship programs; ask staff across the agency to provide additional information or testimonials about the type of work potential applicants will do when sharing the advertised position.
- Prepare retrospective reports and/or track which interns or new hires come from which universities to determine where to concentrate future recruitment efforts.
- Engage directly with students by participating in speaking engagements in university classes, hosting seminar courses on specific topics that your agency focuses on, or hosting mock activities in university classes that mimic the work your agency does. For example, utility commissions may consider hosting mock rate cases at universities in their state to increase student understanding and interest in utility commission work.
- Partner with state authorities around hiring processes (this may look similar to Illinois's Central Management Services Agency or may be a Human Resources [HR] agency) and see if there are opportunities to address hiring issues that cut across multiple state agencies.
- Try to time recruitment activities when you have an open position so you can actively promote during an event.
- Collect resumes and contact information from interested candidates in a database and use it to communicate about open positions.

Challenges of Workforce Recruitment in the Public Sector

Current Staffing at State Government Agencies

Employment in the public sector took a significant hit during the Great Recession. In the five years between July 2008, when state and local government employment was at its historical peak, and July 2013, almost 750,000 state and local government employees lost their jobs.¹ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the public sector, especially state and local government, had only begun to recover from its staffing shortfalls from the recession. In 2019, a year before the pandemic hit, public sector employment sank to 2008 levels for the first time since the recession. The recovery up to this point had been slow, estimated to have taken five years longer than private sector recovery. This progress was hindered when huge numbers of public sector employees retired or were laid off in response to the pandemic.

Even in the years since the pandemic, the increase in public sector retirements has been noted by state agency staff and through surveys of state and local government, which indicate that the majority of retirements are happening now or will be happening in the next few years.² Retirements of experienced public sector employees hit states especially hard, as retirement-age employees have often spent decades at their respective agencies and take years of accumulated institutional knowledge and expertise with them. While public sector hiring is on the increase, staffing and knowledge gaps are further exacerbated by persistent vacancies in public service.³ More broadly, job openings in the public sector are being filled more slowly than all private sector industries.⁴

Within the energy landscape, this trend is particularly concerning. Public sector employees working with the electric power sector ensure that customers have access to reliable and affordable energy. Many states are balancing clean energy goals and planned retirements of aged and carbon-producing power plants with increasing needs for electricity to support manufacturing, data centers, artificial intelligence (AI) companies, transportation, and more. With increased complexity in grid planning, cybersecurity needs, and interdependencies of more sectors in the clean energy transition, short-staffed public agencies will struggle to keep up.

Challenges in Increasing Public Sector Hiring

The recovery following the recession was long and slow, with progress further hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. While hiring of state and local government employees has continued to grow since the pandemic, the public sector still struggles to retain existing and recruit new employees. This slow recovery is due to a number of factors, including but not limited to, competition from public and nonprofit sector jobs that may be able to offer higher pay, improved benefits, and more flexible working formats, a negative public perception of government jobs and their impact, and rigid hiring processes.

Competition from Other Sectors

Government agencies often struggle to hire and retain talented employees when competing with private and nonprofit organizations that may be able to offer higher pay, more competitive benefits, and additional

- 1 Sara Hinkley, "Public Sector Impacts of the Great Recession and COVID-19," UC Berkeley Labor Center, June 19, 2020, <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/public-sector-impacts-great-recession-and-covid-19/#:~:text=Nationally%2C%20state%20and%20local%20government,government%20employees%20lost%20their%20job>
- 2 Gerald Young, "Survey Findings: State and Local Workforce 2022," MissionSquare Research Institute, June 2022, <https://research.missionsq.org/content/media/document/2022/06/2022workforce.pdf>.
- 3 Mark Wolf, "Despite Strong Labor Market, State and Local Government Jobs Go Unfilled," National Conference of State Legislatures, September 18, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/despite-strong-labor-market-state-and-local-government-jobs-go-unfilled>.
- 4 Rose Khattar, Marina Zhavoronkova, and Anona Neal, "Investments in the State and Local Government Workforce Will Deliver Crucial Services and Create Economic Security," Center for American Progress, March 25, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/investments-in-the-state-and-local-government-workforce-will-deliver-crucial-services-and-create-economic-security/>.

flexibility. Skilled professionals may opt for more lucrative positions in nonpublic sector organizations, leaving important government agencies with a talent deficit. In general, public sector wages lag behind comparable private sector jobs—a gap that has only grown since 2019.⁵ Even when states enact wage increases, these increases may require multiple approvals from state officials and strain agency budgets.⁶ Most state government agencies require employees to work in-person at least part-time and are not able to accommodate employees who work out of state. Private and nonprofit sector jobs, on the other hand, typically have more flexibility to offer remote positions and flexible working hours. Additionally, private sector or nonprofit sector employers may be able to offer expanded benefits, such as unlimited paid time off (PTO), generous retirement packages, or large bonuses that public sector employers cannot offer. Finally, the sheer number of approvals and processes required to make changes in public sector benefits, hiring practices, or other workforce recruitment incentives delay how fast these can be enacted, whereas private and nonprofit sector employers can act much more quickly to incentivize applicants when needed. For these and other reasons, public sector hiring practices result in a smaller or less experienced pools of applicants for positions.

Noncompetitive pay and less flexible working arrangements can also lead to high turnover rates within state government agencies. Noncompetitive compensation is one of the top reasons public sector employees have left their public sector positions in recent years.⁷ Additionally, employees may leave their public sector positions and seek remote positions that allow them to move freely and operate from their home. Frequent turnover rates have unintentional consequences, such as disrupting the continuity of government operations and programs, eroding institutional knowledge, hindering long-term planning, and minimizing the size of in-house technical expertise around specific subject matter.

Public Awareness and Perception

Public awareness and perception of state agencies and government overall can impact public sector workforce recruitment for multiple reasons. Lack of public knowledge on what public utility commissions (PUCs), state energy offices, consumer advocate offices, and other state agencies do and what responsibilities they have impacts recruitment efforts. Students or early career professionals are unlikely to seek out these agencies for job opportunities if they do not know they exist and what activities are in scope. There can also be misperceptions about the role of various agencies. PUCs, for example, might be known for utility rates and customer complaints but might not be known for stakeholder convenings, technical workshops, and complex questions about subsidies. Related, job seekers might not realize that PUCs generally focus on how state policy goals will be implemented, rather than what goals to establish (typically a function of the state legislature). The lack of knowledge of state agencies and what they do can result in fewer applications and/or underqualified applicants for agency positions.

In addition, many state agencies may not effectively describe and market their open positions. Job titles are often vague or unclear (e.g., Regulatory Analyst II), and job descriptions may not specifically describe the responsibilities and scope of day-to-day activities to applicants.⁸ While social media and similar tools have helped some state agencies advertise their open positions, capacity-strapped agencies do not always put in this additional work to market and recruit.

5 Mike Maciag, “Government Wage Growth Lags Private Sector by Largest Margin on Record,” Pew Charitable Trusts, February 7, 2022, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/02/07/government-wage-growth-lags-private-sector-by-largest-margin-on-record>.

6 Ibid.

7 Young, “Survey Findings.”

8 NARUC produced a report on recruiting, retaining, and growing cybersecurity expertise that includes sample job descriptions that could be used for cybersecurity-related positions at utility commissions; Ashton Raffety and Lynn Costantini, *A Guide for Public Utility Commissions: Recruiting and Retaining a Cybersecurity Workforce*, NARUC, February 2021, <https://pubs.naruc.org/pub/E454F7A5-155D-0A36-314C-5A2E1E2A0FF9>.

Moreover, negative perceptions of government can have impacts on recruitment efforts. While state government is typically viewed more positively than federal government, a survey conducted in 2022 showed that 45 percent of Americans perceive state government unfavorably.⁹ This number has been growing over time. Negative perceptions and stereotypes exacerbate recruitment issues and can further influence students and recent graduates to apply for other career paths they perceive as more rewarding or less encumbered by stereotypes.

Hiring Requirements and Hiring Processes

In an effort to ensure fairness and objectivity in the hiring process, state government agencies are often subject to rigid educational and experience requirements for their positions that may exclude interested candidates with high potential but limited accredited education or specialized work experience. This expectation is reflected in the educational backgrounds of state and local government employees—according to a study in 2022, state and local government employees hold bachelor degrees at a rate of 57 percent, higher than both federal government and private sector employees.¹⁰ Educational requirements are often used as a proxy for specific skills required for a position; however, these requirements eliminate potentially qualified workers skilled through alternative routes (also known as STARs) from the applicant pool. STARs may have a high school diploma, an associate's degree, an incomplete bachelor's degree, or other credentials. Educational requirements may also have an impact on diverse representation in state government. More than 6 in 10 Black workers and 5 in 10 Hispanic workers hold a high school diploma but not a bachelor's degree, which would disqualify them from many public sector positions.¹¹

In addition to educational and experience requirements, state government hiring processes are often drawn out and difficult to navigate. Most state government positions are posted on government websites and not necessarily promoted on popular networking websites such as LinkedIn. Even students who have secured internship positions with state agencies and have been vetted through their work at these agencies may struggle to navigate an opaque and bureaucratic application process for permanent positions.

Hiring difficulties and knowledge gaps about job details are exacerbated by a bifurcated hiring design: HR departments, which often lead hiring processes, may understand government hiring processes but may not understand the work they are advertising; employees with knowledge of the work may not understand how to navigate government hiring processes or have the capacity to get involved enough in hiring processes to ensure the outcomes they are seeking.

"Hiring managers are capacity strapped and they want to hire someone who they don't have to do as much training for; the downside is, you actually lock out candidates who, with 3 to 4 months of investment, could actually really help and support you and make a significant impact." –Talita Elizeu, Director of Partnerships, Govern For America

9 Pew Research Center, "Americans' Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role," June 6, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/>.

10 Maciag, "Government Wage Growth Lags Private Sector."

11 Marina Zhavoronkova and Kate Naranjo, "The Benefits of Skills-Based Hiring for the State and Local Government Workforce," Center for American Progress, November 21, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-benefits-of-skills-based-hiring-for-the-state-and-local-government-workforce/>.

Types of Partnerships and Examples

Collaborations between public sector agencies and higher education institutions take on a variety of forms, represented by official partnerships that have existed for decades to ad hoc partnerships set up through informal methods. The type of partnership is often determined by the relationships and capacity that leaders and staff at both the state agency and university have available to initiate and administer these programs.

Direct Partnerships

Direct partnerships are partnerships set up directly between one or multiple state agencies and one or more universities in the state. These are characterized by some sort of semi-permanent agreement or structure between the agency and the university, which may be an official agreement or memorandum of understanding (MOU), university course credit for students who participate, and/or a dedicated funding source from the agency to the university for the position(s) or program(s). Tailored application processes also often accompany these programs, where students apply to the university program and, once accepted, are placed by the university program staff in the agency or agencies that align with their interests. These partnerships have a consistent history and process that lives on even if staff behind the program change.

Third-Party Partnerships

Third-party partnerships are similar to direct partnerships except that they are facilitated by a third-party organization. These third-party organizations can be nonprofit, private, or public entities that either have their own funding to support their mission (which is typically centered around developing young leaders and interest in public service careers and/or increasing diversity in the public sector) or negotiate funding through their state agency partners for the recruitment work that the third-party organizations do and the support they provide to placed recruits. These third-party organizations will engage in official agreements for funding purposes and typically have their own application process tailored to their organization's goals and priorities, which is used in lieu of a state agency's application process. Like direct partnerships, third-party partnerships processes will likely remain relatively consistent even with staff turnover.

Open-Ended Partnerships

In contrast to direct partnerships, open-ended partnerships are characterized by their informal connection between state agencies and universities and their lack of assumed permanence. State agencies may post open positions or internships on university job websites, participate in virtual or in-person university career fairs, engage with students through classes (e.g., leading mock rate cases in law classes, speaking on environmental regulations in policy classes), or ask employees to leverage alumni connections with their universities to encourage interested students to apply for open jobs. The examples in this type of partnership rely on individual efforts of staff and others on behalf of the state agencies in question. There are no agreements in place that these efforts will continue year to year or will be structured similarly over time. For example, while state agencies may have an internship program at their agency, the internship program is not an outward facing, standardized process.

One question to ask when determining whether a partnership is direct or open-ended: If the staff person leading recruitment were to leave, would the program stop or look very different?

Collaborative Partnership Examples

To better understand workforce recruitment challenges and the three types of partnerships identified, NCEP interviewed a combination of federal agency, state agency, university, and nonprofit staff who work on state agency workforce recruitment.

Name	Title	Organization	Type of Partnership
Molly Lamb	Executive Director, Center for State Policy and Leadership	University of Illinois-Springfield	Direct
Ronald Phillips	Senior Director of Government Relations	Texas Tech University	Direct
Talita Elizeu	Director of Partnerships	Govern For America	Third-Party
Dr. Susan Hamm	Director, Integrated Strategies Office, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy	Department of Energy	Third-Party
Whitney Mays	Recruitment Manager	Virginia State Corporation Commission	Open-Ended
Ashley Harrison	Recruiter	Virginia State Corporation Commission	Open-Ended
Stacey Washington	Deputy Director	South Carolina Energy Office	Open-Ended
Pam Smith	Manager, Division of Administration	Illinois Environmental Protection Agency	Open-Ended/ Direct*

*Illinois Environmental Protection Agency participates in a direct partnership with the UIS GPSI program; its other recruitment efforts fall into the category of "open-ended partnerships."

Direct Partnerships

To represent direct partnerships, NCEP interviewed administrators at two universities. The examples follow the GPSI program at UIS, an internship program that places UIS students in a variety of state agencies across Illinois, and the TTU Government and Public Service Internship, an internship program that places students in federal and state congressional offices. This section details takeaways from these interviews on the structure of the partnerships, their key factors to success, and challenges, as well as unique aspects of each program.

University of Illinois-Springfield Graduate Public Service Internship Program

UIS is a public university in Springfield, Illinois, which hosts the GPSI program. The internship program, which has been offered for more than 45 years and is intended for graduate students earning their master's degree at UIS, offers interns placement in state government agencies in the fall and spring semesters.

Characteristics

The GPSI program begins with solicitations from state agencies to UIS for specific positions that they want students to fill. Interested students then submit their own applications to the UIS, detailing their skills and interests. Once all applications have been submitted, UIS selects interns and matches them to a state agency or position most closely aligned to their skills and interests. Once selected, UIS employs students as university employees and provides them with a tuition waiver, partial fee waiver, and a stipend during their public sector internship.¹²

¹² UIS also offers a Doctoral Fellowship program, which is a similar program intended for doctoral students studying at UIS. Doctoral students are given structured opportunities with state government agencies, tuition assistance, a stipend or salary, and funding for professional development.

This funding is provided through a formal agreement between UIS and its participating agencies. In addition to this funding, the formal agreements detail the general job description and duties for the student's position, which are agreed upon by both parties.

The program aims to create a pipeline from students to the public sector through exposure to state government experiences and skill development. The program prepares students to navigate state government application processes, translating their educational experience into professional years of experience to increase their chances of fulfilling application requirements, and offers chances to build valuable connections with state government officials, fellow interns, and professionals in respective fields.

"We've had some good successes there [peer marketing on the GPS Program]—the students have really helped pull other students into knowing the value and richness of a career path they just went into... especially in niche areas like a history major who can work for the Department of Natural Resources with historical sites across Illinois." –Molly Lamb, Executive Director for the Center for State Policy and Leadership, UIS

Keys to Success

The GPSI program is successful in no small part due to its strong relationships. UIS's location in Springfield, the Illinois state capital, allows them to leverage their proximity to policy decision-makers and state government agencies to develop relationships and build the GPSI program. Many of the UIS employees have a background of state government experience, providing an additional avenue for networking through prior government experience. The strong relationships between UIS's GPSI program and the state agencies that participate create a positive feedback loop; as more agencies participate in the program with positive experiences, it reinforces the need for the program and justifies its ongoing work. This positive feedback loop is mimicked among students who participate in the program. As all state agencies in Illinois have recently felt a pressing need to fill employee vacancies, the program has become especially important.

"For the most part, persons and positions on this [UIS] side have been familiar and have had relationships with state government, which is really important...I spent 15 years in state government and the previous two directors for the GPS Program had retired from state government...so we had the ability to recognize the importance of placing persons and positions that not only are theoretically knowledgeable about government and public service, but also have experience and relationships there. I think that's really key to move the program strongly forward and keep those relationships intact." –Molly Lamb

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) takes advantage of the GPSI program and produces one of the largest groups of interns within the program. Its relationship with the GPSI program is a strong one and has led Illinois EPA to hire many of the student interns after their participation in the program.

"The relationship that does the most to increase student interest and engagement in public service is the one with UIS and their longstanding GPSI program. That's the whole reason the program was developed. It was to expose people to a 2-year internship in the public service sector, and I truly believe this program sets people on that course. One of the things we have learned from that is that even if the person doesn't end up at the Illinois EPA, they have an appreciation for work with a public agency. It's not always about whether they will come work for us but will they help portray us to their colleagues down the road the way we should be portrayed?" –Pam Smith, Manager, Division of Administration, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

Another key part of the program's success is its financial benefits. First and foremost, student interns receive a tuition waiver that covers a portion of their tuition payment; this can help alleviate the debt burden when students graduate. Interns receive a monthly stipend for hours worked during the fall and spring semesters; this stipend is doubled during the summer semester. Students also receive an allotted amount of money each year for professional development opportunities, such as attending conferences, subscribing to scholarly journals, and memberships in professional organizations. Combined, the stipends have a significant impact on the financial burden of tuition and promote students' professional development opportunities.

"From the students' perspective, they can walk away having 2 years of experience in a public service organization and have light debt, if any debt, and they have the opportunity to walk into a full-time job at the close of it for an organization that absolutely needs the capacity." –Molly Lamb

Challenges

The formality of the agreements between UIS and the agencies it partners with provides challenges as well as benefits. Although formal agreements offer certain protections and provide a level of stability, drafting such agreements can be meticulous and time-consuming. Often, the agreements are specific to the individual participating state agency. There are careful considerations of legal, ethical, and organizational aspects that promote fairness to the interns and host institutions that may require many rounds of negotiation. The time invested in this process, while essential, can cause delays and prolong the onboarding process.

"The formal agreements are necessary, but they are terribly time consuming. And just because you work with one state agency doesn't mean all the state agencies want the same things. There's language and sorting and negotiation. So that's a challenge." –Molly Lamb

Texas Tech University Government and Public Service Internship Program

TTU is a public research university in Lubbock, Texas, that places students in public service internships through a Government and Public Service Internship program.

Characteristics

The program started with student intern placements in congressional offices in Washington, DC, and expanded to include internship opportunities in the Texas State Legislature and congressional district offices local to Lubbock. Internship opportunities are available in the fall, spring, and summer semesters. The program's main objective is to provide students who have a strong interest in government and expose them to the rewards of public service, while developing their leadership skills.

"We get quality students, and the students that we provide to Washington, DC, and Austin are of a high level...we send some of our top students and that has helped develop the credibility and reputation of the program." –Ronald Phillips, Senior Director of Government Relations, Texas Tech University

Keys to Success

One of the key strengths of TTU's internship program is its pool of high-quality candidates. Ronald Phillips, the Senior Director of Government Relations and director of the program, credits the program's application and selection process with ensuring that high-caliber students go on to participate as interns. Phillips conducts much of the interviewing and selection of candidates, and focuses on the quality of students rather than filling

a certain number. Beyond that, Phillips also looks for opportunities that best suit the maturity, experience, and interest of the students and helps match agencies with students that will best meet their needs.

"It just takes time and quality. The quality of the kids that you send up surprisingly ends up spreading by word of mouth. You have good students there [in the program], and people become aware of that. Now, I probably spend more time on calls coming in than I do making calls." –Ronald Phillips

The success of the program can largely be attributed to the institutional history of the program and the relationships that have developed over the course of the program's 24-year history between Phillips and various government agencies and congressional offices. Over its history, the program has placed enough interns resulting in the growth of reputation. Host agencies and congressional offices as well as former interns with positive experiences have spread word of the program, helping enable connections between government institutions and TTU interns.

"We've been doing this for 24 years. I've sent 700 to 800 students through this program now, so we have former interns in a lot of different places...I received a call from someone at the Department of Commerce, for example, who said she was friends with one of my former interns, and they told me about your program." –Ronald Phillips

Challenges

One challenge is finding the right points of contact. While congressional offices often have intern coordinators that can be points of contact for administrators of the TTU program, there may not be a designated point of contact in other agencies, or they may be difficult to identify. This can lead to delays in placing interns in agencies that would most interest them or a missed opportunity to make a potential connection to an agency or congressional office.

"It's sometimes difficult to find the right person within a state agency. So, having a good point of contact, and more importantly, having a relationship with someone at the state agency, that would be beneficial. It would be nice to know, when I'm looking to place a student, that there is an intern coordinator or designated person that I can reach out to." –Ronald Phillips

In addition, bureaucratic processes can prove incompatible with the internship timelines that TTU follows. It is more difficult to place students in agencies that require applications to be funneled through a centralized agency or application process. By the time a student finishes the agency's application process, the deadline for student placement may have already passed. Offices or agencies that allow for direct placement, as is often the case for congressional offices, are ideal.

Third-Party Partnerships

To represent partnerships with third-party organizations, NCEP interviewed administrators and staff from two organizations that fall into this category. The first is GFA, a nonprofit that connects students to full-time government jobs through fellowship and internship programs, with the ultimate goal of creating a lifelong commitment to public service. The second program analyzed is the CEIF, administered by the DOE, which connects students and early career professionals with public service organizations. This section details takeaways from these interviews on the structure of the partnerships and their keys to successes and challenges, as well as unique aspects of each program.

Govern For America Fellowship

GFA facilitates a two-year Fellowship Program that places recent graduates in public sector positions. GFA's overarching goals are to reduce the barriers to entry in public service and foster diversity to better reflect the citizens in the communities that the public sector regulates and impacts. GFA supplies its fellows with wraparound services such as mentorship, training, and professional development. These support services bolster the host organization's own professional development services and train fellows in the skills needed to have a successful career in public service.

Characteristics

GFA partners with state and local governments nationwide across six subject matter areas: technology and infrastructure, health and human services, energy and environment, management and budget, the criminal justice system, and education and workforce development.

GFA builds partnerships through a multipronged approach. When identifying government partners, GFA will look for signals that this government entity's values align with GFA's around hiring diverse candidates for public service jobs. These signals may include public messages posted by state and local governments reinforcing their commitment to equity or work focused on lowering entry requirements for public sector professions. GFA identifies some partners by searching for government entities that post a need for new, diverse talent or identify a hiring crisis in their community. To develop relationships and partnerships with universities, GFA works with university-community partners, such as civic or services centers; posts opportunities via social media to reach universities and students; and develops relationships with university professors and leaders who may be uniquely positioned to inform students about fellowship opportunities.

Once a partnership is established, GFA charges a fee to the government entity partially commensurate with the time and effort used to filter and evaluate applications, interview and select students, match them with their government partner, and support them with wraparound services of the course of their fellowship. GFA leverages philanthropic funding to off-set the cost of the program for government agencies. The actual job title, benefits, and compensation is determined by the host agency.

Of GFA's most recent graduating cohort, 93 percent are continuing roles in government or government-adjacent roles.¹³ Currently, GFA is partnering with The People Lab at the Harvard Kennedy School to create a Fellowships Learning Collaborative to examine how fellowship participation in the public sector affects fellows' career trajectories and views of government.¹⁴

Keys to Success

One benefit of the GFA program is that it allows government entities to outsource much of the work required to identify qualified candidates. Capacity-strapped government entities do not have to invest the time, budget, resources, and connections into finding candidates, and are supported in their own mentorship and development of fellows through GFA's additional support services. The GFA program can also guarantee high-quality hires through their own application process.

"Partnering with an outside organization offers the opportunity to embrace and pilot building early-career talent pipelines without the need for a full organizational investment in creating a new program. Governments can leverage our existing recruiting relationships, rigorous selection process, training, and wraparound support, to provide a positive candidate and fellowship experience without having to build that out internally." –Talita Elizeu

13 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6528636dd5f9c21bfc352483/t/6595e007fea6813be56e48ee/1704321032210/2023_Impact_Report_Final.pdf

14 Ibid.

GFA's philosophy of reducing barriers to entry also provides a larger pool of potential candidates. Requirements around certain technical skills or years of work experience may limit the pool of applicants in a typical agency's hiring process; GFA is able to identify students through their application process who may have leadership or technical skills that may not directly transfer to specific public sector positions but show that they are capable and willing to learn what is needed in the position. GFA's core mission of increasing diversity in the public sector can also help agencies with similar goals to find and place fellows.

"GFA has been essential to my career because it not only made the government hiring process more accessible, but also placed me on a team that empowered me to do meaningful work. As I've continued my career in government after GFA, my time as a Fellow created a foundation that has then allowed me to excel in my career and impact going forward." –Harrison MacRae, Special Assistant for Emerging Technology, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (GFA Alumni)

Challenges

GFA is limited in partnering with government entities that allow for direct placement; without this, candidates would have to pass through the GFA application process as well as the host agency's own application process. GFA also faces challenges in placing students in subject areas with higher technical skill requirements; while students may be passionate about public service and a specific subject area, they may not have the technical background to fill a need at a specific agency. Ultimately, GFA tries to fill existing and anticipated gaps in capacity in public service; when trying to accomplish this, they do face challenges in predicting future government capacity needs.

"Some states have stringent requirements and don't have ways to place people directly. Those state governments tend to be more difficult for us to work with because that means our Fellows have to apply to our program and then apply to the role directly. One of the major challenges we consistently face is determining which governments have mechanisms for direct placements, as it substantially streamlines our matching and placement processes." –Talita Elizeu

DOE's Clean Energy Innovator Fellowship

The CEIF is a national program funded by the DOE's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE), Grid Deployment Office (GDO), and Office of State and Community Energy Programs, and Office of Indian Energy Policy & Programs. The goal of the program is to increase access to clean energy career opportunities across the country, while accelerating the national energy transition. DOE solicits applications from host institutions¹⁵ for clean energy projects focused on clean energy and grid resilience and matches them with recent graduates and professionals. Fellows stay for up to two years at their host institutions with full funding from DOE; in addition, fellows have professional development and travel stipends.

Characteristics of Partnership

Eligible host institutions include electric cooperatives, grid operators, municipal utilities, public utility commissions, state energy offices, and tribal entities. Host institutions apply for fellows by providing information on what their institution does, who the mentors of the fellows will be, what they would like to explore in their proposed project, and their expectations for the outcomes, among other details. Fellow candidates apply separately and indicate their preferred 3-5 placements based on the selected host institution's clean energy projects and location. Once DOE screens fellow candidates for eligibility and interest in clean energy, their

¹⁵ Eligible host institutions can include electric cooperatives, grid operators, municipal utilities, public utility commissions, state energy offices and Tribal entities in the United States and U.S. territories.

applications are sent to the hosts they identified who then conduct interviews and notify DOE of their top 3 selections. Finally, DOE conducts a pre-offer interview with both parties to confirm the host and fellow are a good match and set up for a successful experience.

Keys to Success

The CEIF program is successful in large part due to the benefits it provides fellows, host institutions, and DOE. Fellows gain hands-on experience in the clean energy sector and leverage the name recognition of the Department of Energy for future career opportunities. Host institutions explore projects that increase the institution's knowledge and ability to tackle an issue that they may not have existing capacity to address. CEIF supports DOE's mission and program priorities, establishing a strong talent pipeline for the clean energy sector, providing support to critical energy organizations, and providing opportunities for future clean energy leaders.

The program has been scalable, in part, due to its financial support and DOE's position as a trusted third party outside of the agency or host institution. As a third-party facilitator, DOE can provide funding, support, and expertise without providing day-to-day subject matter guidance. The host institutions, who do are relieved of the burden to secure the hiring budget and recruit new talent. DOE recruits from a wide swath of host institutions with varying needs and locations and recruits a diverse set of qualified fellowship candidates. DOE's role as the third party in this type of partnership is further enhanced by their existing administrative support system. DOE outsources administrative needs to the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE), which administers multiple internship and fellowship programs including CEIF and thus has the capacity and knowledge to administer the CEIF program.

As the CEIF program grows, it creates a positive feedback loop. Institutions and fellows who have positive experiences spread the word and increase the number of applicants. In 2022, the program hosted 24 fellows across 24 host institutions (11 of which were state agencies), and in 2023, the program expanded to include 29 fellows across 27 host institutions (14 of which were state agencies). The 2024 fellowship cohort will be announced in early summer 2024. DOE pointed to several in-process opportunities to improve the program, such as resources that will help host institutions design appropriate projects, future events for participants to share their experiences and feedback, and expanded promotional activities to reach underrepresented groups.

Challenges

The primary challenges that CEIF faces are around relationship-building and communication. To help reach the most potential host institutions and fellows, DOE must strengthen and grow its relationships with universities, professional societies, and other networking organizations to increase awareness and interest in the program. This can be difficult when competing with other programs and opportunities in clean energy.

"We learned that you need to build the relationships with the universities and professional societies to get them interested in promoting the opportunity. Everyone wants these organizations to be promoting their opportunities, so we need to make sure we have a very, very strong connection there." –Dr. Susan Hamm, Director, Integrated Strategies Office, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, U.S. Department of Energy

Once fellows are placed, DOE can only provide support but cannot guarantee that fellows have a successful experience with their host institutions. To prevent suboptimal experiences, DOE helps host institutions with scoping an appropriate research project and communicates to fellows with expectations for the roles and skillsets needed for specific projects. For the first time, DOE hosted a CEIF Fellow Summit in 2023, which brought together fellows from all over the United States and U.S. territories to share learnings and feedback on the program, which has helped it address challenges.



Photo of the 2023 CEIF Cohort during their first CEIF Fellow Summit.

*“This program has been very helpful to our relatively small agency at a time of massive change in the energy systems, while also providing valuable professional development opportunities for our fellows.”
–Justin LeVeque, Section Chief for Research and Emerging Issues, Colorado Public Utility Commission*

Open-Ended Partnerships

NCEP interviewed three agencies to learn more about recruitment strategies in “open-ended partnerships”: the Virginia State Corporation Commission (SCC), the Illinois EPA, and the South Carolina State Energy Office. The Illinois EPA also participates on the other side of a direct partnership, participating frequently as a host agency in the UIS GPSI program. Each program is described below, followed by the key factors of success, and the challenges across all three of the agencies.

Virginia State Corporation Commission

The Virginia SCC is a state agency headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, that regulates utilities, insurance, state-chartered financial institutions, securities, retail franchising, and railroads. The SCC is funded through revenues supplied by regulatory fees and statutorily set fees as opposed to general revenue funds. The SCC is led by three commissioners and supported by more than 700 full-time staff.

Characteristics

Historically, one SCC HR staff member oversaw college recruitment as one of many other responsibilities. In 2021, the SCC hired a full-time, dedicated college recruitment staff person who manages numerous engagement activities with colleges and universities in the state, including coordinating SCC representation at job fairs, establishing relationships with key faculty at universities’ career centers, hosting SCC information sessions for interested students, and leveraging staff alumni connections to reach students and support new hires.

The SCC’s recruitment efforts focus on maintaining established relationships with colleges and universities while also building upon those relationships by creating new engagement approaches. Where the SCC has an existing relationship with a university, they engage in low lift to the university events such as job fairs, SCC staff panels, mock interview programs, classroom visits, student organization visits, seminar courses taught by SCC employees, and so on.

To further support existing relationships and build new connections with universities, the SCC tailors its approach depending on the needs of universities and students. The agency is starting to explore student on-site visits to the SCC location for mock hearings, communicates consistently with universities, asks interns with positive experiences to rate the SCC on various job search and internship search platforms, and applies for awards such as Top Employer for Interns through Virginia’s Talent and Opportunity Partnership (VTOP). These efforts build the name recognition of the SCC and create a positive feedback loop to increase the number and quality of applicants.

Current staff are involved in recruitment efforts through the SCC College Ambassador program. The SCC sends a survey to SCC staff to collect information about their alma maters and interest in various activities such as attending in-person job fairs, sitting on a panel, attending virtual recruitment activities, and mentoring hired interns. Based on responses, the recruitment staff leverages other SCC employees to participate in recruitment and mentorship activities, while also respecting their preferences and capacity to help.

“It makes the most sense to reach out to who has already expressed an interest in participating. If they’ve expressed interest, they’re going to be more engaged. The ambassadors have helped out with mock interviews that the schools have asked us to participate in as well as the career fairs. The ambassador’s list has been extremely helpful for us to go look to see if we have any alums from each university and then reach out to see if they would be interested in participating.” –Ashley Harrison, Recruiter, Virginia State Corporation Commission

On the back end, the SCC prepares hiring reports that show the output of their work and the universities from which they receive the most hires. This helps the recruitment staff demonstrate the value of their work and prioritize which universities and activities they should concentrate more or less of their effort.



Photo of the 2024 summer interns for the SCC.

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

The Illinois EPA is a state agency headquartered in Springfield, Illinois, and tasked with implementing federal and state environmental laws and regulations to protect air, land, and water in Illinois. It is staffed by approximately 670 employees spread across three bureaus: the Bureau of Air, the Bureau of Water, and the Bureau of Land as well as the Divisions of Legal Counsel, Laboratories, and Administration. In addition to its Springfield headquarters, Illinois EPA has eight regional offices and an off-site laboratory. Its recruitment

strategies most closely align with open-ended partnerships, but the Illinois EPA also takes advantage of a direct partnership, often serving as an agency partner to the UIS GPSI program.

Characteristics

Outside of the UIS GPSI, Illinois EPA dedicates three staff members to participate in about 8 to 10 recruitment events per semester. These recruitment events include job fairs sponsored by varying organizations and/or legislators. In addition to these staff, Illinois EPA will often bring young employees, alumni, or recent hires to recruitment events to help interested students learn more about the day-to-day work of the agency from a peer and ask questions of employees who have recently been through the job search process.

Like many state agencies, the Illinois EPA is capacity-strapped, so it attempts to direct resources and staff to recruitment efforts that will address their highest need or that best align with the agency's focus. The Illinois EPA will typically first try to recruit at science- and engineering-focused career fairs or within STEM university programs. When this is not possible, the Illinois EPA will recruit at general job fairs. Outside of job fairs, the Illinois EPA looks for other ways to connect with students who may be interested in working for the agency. In the past, this has included setting up information booths outside of department buildings to engage with students as they walk to and from their classes or encouraging staff, when approached by professors or faculty from their state alma mater, to speak to university classes about their roles.

South Carolina Energy Office

The State Energy Office within the South Carolina Office of Regulatory Staff (SC Energy Office) is a state entity that serves as the state's primary energy planning agency and promotes energy efficiency, renewable energy, and clean transportation. It accomplishes its mission through education and outreach, funding programs, energy planning, and a data clearinghouse that supplies data on a variety of energy topics. The SC Energy

Office is funded by the DOE State Energy Program and is one of seven departments in South Carolina's Office of Regulatory Staff, which represents utility consumer interests before the Public Service Commission (PSC) of South Carolina. New funding enabled through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) allows them to implement programs recommended through their energy planning process.

Characteristics of Partnership

The SC Energy Office uses a relatively informal and ad hoc strategy to recruit students from universities within the state. It relies on a network of energy leaders and university professors that have developed over many years of collaborating and communicating within the relatively small network of energy professionals across the state. These connections are established from attending meetings, stakeholder sessions, and conferences; developing work products together or for each other; working on initiatives such as their loan and grant programs; and collaborating with the Association of South Carolina Energy Managers, which often includes energy managers at universities across the state. The SC Energy Office utilizes this network by passing internship and employment openings to professors and other university contacts who can identify the students that may be interested in these opportunities. An additional source of advertising is the DOE Clean Cities University Workforce Development Program, an internship program administered by DOE that includes South Carolina as a host.

In some cases, the SC Energy Office also exercises intentional engagement with universities whose students they specifically want to recruit such as minority-serving institutions or institutions with new environmental or energy programs. In other instances, the SC Energy Office takes advantage of opportunities to speak at university sustainability groups or sit in on panels.

"You must be intentional: intentionally engaging universities and connecting and networking with faculty and staff. They can learn about what you can offer and will know students that would be a good fit."
–Stacey Washington, Deputy Director, South Carolina Energy Office

Keys to Success

Consistent Communication and Relationship Building: Consistent communication and relationship building are key components to the success of the Virginia SCC, Illinois EPA, and the SC Energy Office's recruitment efforts. Many of the recruitment relationships established between these agencies and higher education institutions, while solidified in their institutional history, would not have developed without consistent communication and repeated recruitment activities over many years. Staff within these agencies have established relationships with key staff at universities through their recruitment efforts as well as prior experiences working together in previous jobs. These connection-building efforts are made stronger by universities that also have strong and well-connected career services departments. To support consistent communication, it is important for these agencies to keep up with university recruitment schedules and to follow up with students they have spoken to at recruitment events. Agencies will have the most success recruiting for summer internships or full-time positions in the fall (September–November) and early spring (January, February, or March) because most students endeavor to secure positions by April or May.

"It's continuing to show up. It's building relationships with different faculty members. Virginia Commonwealth University is downtown in Richmond, so they are in proximity. Over the years, we have established great relationships with faculty there, and it's the school where, when we attend, students know about the Commission and are interested in working for us. At other Virginia schools, students haven't heard of the SCC, so we're still working on our brand recognition at those schools." –Whitney Mays, Recruitment Manager, Virginia State Corporation Commission

Due to limited resources and capacity, it is important that these agencies ensure their communication and recruitment efforts are directed at the most interested parties. The Illinois EPA focus their recruitment efforts on higher education institutions with programs that match the skillset needed at the agency. The SCC conducts hiring reports to identify from which schools and programs they make most of their hires and where high potential connections can be made to help focus future recruitment efforts.

Keeping Recruitment Fresh: To attract students or recent graduates to public sector work, agencies will often bring recently graduated employees to recruiting events to speak to students. This allows students to talk to employees who have recently been through the job-search process themselves and who share a similar perspective to the students to whom they speak. Ensuring marketing materials are up to date is important because marketing photos or materials that look dated will deter prospective applicants.

"One thing we've started doing over the last couple of years is, instead of just HR staff going to job fairs, we are looking for recent hires from those universities that are sitting in a job similar to those that we're trying to recruit for. They can speak to what the job actually is, what they like about it, and what they like about working here. And then we also have someone else at the table who can walk them through how to apply for the job. We're finding that combination is having some good results for us." –Pam Smith

Illinois EPA: Collaboration with the Central Management Services Department

Illinois EPA's recruitment efforts have been aided in part by their collaboration with the Illinois Department of Central Management Services (CMS) Department. This relationship was initially established when CMS began an overhaul of their hiring practices. During this overhaul, they established consistent communication with different state agencies within Illinois, including the EPA, and these avenues of communication have persisted. The reforms enacted by CMS have improved the speed of the hiring process for the EPA and CMS is in the process of trying to address other hiring issue areas by launching working groups, pilot programs, and software solutions to investigate direct hiring process and increase transparency into the hiring process across the state agency system.

"It only works efficiently when everyone is spinning the wheel together. When we have a stumble, we can all stumble. So I think that's where the open lines of communication with CMS has become more important." –Pam Smith

Challenges

Identifying Key Staff: Difficulty in finding connections or keeping up consistent communication with key staff at universities consistently challenges the SCC and other agencies. Some universities are not active or consistent in their communication, which can make it difficult to build relationships and stay apprised of hiring events. In addition to this, staff turnover hurts relationships with universities, especially fledgling relationships. The Illinois EPA experiences challenges with staff turnaround, especially with their university partners. When staff contacts leave the universities, they take with them relationships that can be difficult to re-establish.

"Some universities are super active and ready to do every single program idea imaginable. Then you have some universities who aren't as well staffed in their career services department and there aren't as many opportunities to coordinate events. So, definitely, I think the communication piece can be a challenge." –Ashley Harrison

Lack of Knowledge of Agency: The lack of awareness of these agencies and what they do challenges recruitment for multiple reasons. Students unfamiliar with the SCC, the SC Energy Office, or other agencies like them are less likely to engage with the agencies at in-person career fairs or online; even those who have heard of these agencies may not understand or may misunderstand their functions and thus not apply for opportunities. The SC Energy Office has many applicants who do not understand the office's scope of work; specifically, that it does not serve as an advocate or policy-maker. This lack of understanding creates confusion and may deter applicants best suited to the work of the SC Energy Office from applying.

"A lot of people want to work on policy. And then they get here, and they realize that we are a state agency and we cannot advocate. So, it's a little hindering." –Stacey Washington

Scheduling: Matching agency recruitment staff schedules with university schedules presents difficulties. It is important to understand the cycling of job/career-related events with higher education institutions to know when to post opportunities, such as internships, fellowships, or full-time positions. Actively including agency staff in recruitment events can be difficult due to busy staff schedules.

Competition: Public sector agencies face competition with other private and nonprofit organizations that can offer higher compensation or more flexible working environments. Additionally, due to restrictions on how state government agencies can spend money, they are often unable to take advantage of opportunities or offer benefits that nonpublic organizations can. Private sector companies may receive certain benefits if they sponsor recruitment events, such as being able to select their booth location for in-person events or utilize multiple booths, to broadcast their logo on the recruitment event website, to post open positions with primacy on student job search websites, and other perks. The SCC and other agencies, given that they are public sector agencies, cannot sponsor events. Illinois EPA, along with many other state agencies, are unable to accommodate fully remote positions. As a result, the Illinois EPA competes with opportunities that have these flexibilities. Younger generation employees also have different values; some of these the Illinois EPA can accommodate, while others—such as access to certain climates and natural landscapes—they cannot.

“I think part of it is COVID, and being able to work remotely. In the private sector, you may not have to live where you work, whereas that’s not always an option for us... So, we’re competing in ways that the state is still trying to wrap its head around.”—Pam Smith

Finding and Keeping Qualified Applicants: Many public sector agencies experience challenges with their inability to directly hire interns or prospective applicants. The state hiring process can be arduous and creates an additional hurdle that may prevent students from applying. All three agencies also struggle to attract applicants with technical backgrounds to fill their more technical roles. Leadership within the agencies note that students who attain degrees in sustainability or environmental programs often leave their state if it does not have strong clean energy goals, seeking opportunities in other states where sustainability and clean energy goals are more prominent.

Emerging Pathways to Support Future Workforce Needs: Clean Energy Pipelines

Many interviewees within this collaboration brief identified that their organizations and others are looking to create a “pipeline” of young professionals in the energy sector through their partnerships with universities. These pipelines are pursued in a variety of formal and informal ways. Increasingly, states are creating public-private, multi-agency, multi-organizational collaboratives in formal “clean energy pipeline” programs, including the following two examples:

- **Maine Clean Energy Partnership (CEP):** The CEP was launched by the Maine Governor’s Energy Office (the state energy office for Maine) to advance Maine’s clean energy, climate, economic development, and workforce goals and Maine Governor Janet Mills’s goal to double Maine’s clean energy and energy efficiency jobs by 2030. The CEP was created in anticipation of the need for clean energy jobs that will come as a result of these goals. The Advisory Group leading the planning of the CEP consist of members from clean energy and energy efficiency companies, academic institutions, labor and workforce organizations, construction firms, technology experts, and representatives from state government, and is currently co-chaired by staff from the Governor’s Energy Office and the University of Maine System. In December 2022, the Governor’s Energy Office awarded \$2.5 million to clean energy employers, educational institutions, industry associations, and nonprofit organizations to develop new curricula, provide technical training and experiential learning, deploy new job placement services, and other activities related to workforce development and training.
- **Mississippi Virtual Quad Innovation Cluster (V-Quad):** Administered by the Mississippi Development Authority, the V-Quad is a public-private partnership that brings together research universities, industry representatives, government, and nonprofits to build an innovative, virtual incubator network to support Mississippi technology ventures focused on energy- and agriculture-related technologies.



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