

DIVERSITY IN EARLY-CAREER TECH POLICY ROLES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



Tsion Tesfaye, Communications Justice Fellow, Lead Researcher

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To those of you serving in the public interest community now, or who hope to in the future: Thank you for your efforts in championing diversity wherever you are. We are all better for it.

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The Importance of Technology Policy Advocacy Training

Public Knowledge launched a fellowship program seven years ago to provide a pathway to aspiring early-career public interest advocates. Without on-ramps like fellowships, aspiring advocates face a "Catch 22" where most advocacy jobs require experience, but one cannot gain that experience without first having a job. Public Knowledge created more than 20 full-time fellowships

during this time frame, enabling fellows to work side-by-side with Public Knowledge advocates and experts to learn every aspect of public interest advocacy. Many of these fellows eventually obtained more senior policy positions on Capitol Hill; at the Federal Communications Commission; or at organizations including National Telecommunications and Information Administration; Common Cause; National Hispanic Media Coalition; and many others. One even became a State Senator in Nevada.

Public Knowledge devised this fellowship program to increase diversity in the public policy sphere. Two-thirds of the fellows hired into this program from 2013-2020 were female, nearly two-thirds were people of color, and more than one-third were from families where at least one parent was born outside the U.S. At least three identified as LGBTQ+. During that time, Public Knowledge also hosted more than 50 interns and externs. As we hired and worked with all of these talented early-career advocates, we learned a lot about what it takes to join this field, especially for applicants from marginalized communities. We learned that many privileged job seekers rely on family or community networks to illuminate paths and open doors, and those from affluent households can afford to serve in low or unpaid internships or fellowships to gain a foothold. Those benefits are not available to less privileged or affluent applicants. On the positive side, we learned that passion for public interest work, advocacy, social justice, and technology policy is predictive of success in the field. These experiences led Public Knowledge to establish a study on diversity in tech policy; to create a Communications Justice Fellowship; and to hire an exceptional researcher, Tsion Tesfaye, to serve as the fellow and carry out the work.

Public Knowledge is grateful for the support of the Project sponsors and pleased to be able to share the results of this research, which we hope will help to increase diversity in the field. At the same time, we present these findings humbly, knowing that our desire to improve diversity is still greater than our successes, and we will continue to learn and strive to do our part to increase diversity and equity in our own programs.

Kristine DeBry
Chief of Staff & Senior Counsel

Executive Summary

Technology policy nonprofits in Washington, D.C., seek goals such as internet access, online privacy, free speech, broadband deployment, and pro-competition policies for internet users. They are not household names, but they fight for policies that promote and regulate the technologies that we rely on every day to live our lives. Early-career opportunities in these organizations often launch individuals into the tech policy field, where they pursue positions of increasing seniority, raising the volume of their voices and improving their career prospects. Ultimately, they may work their way to decision-making positions, such as in a presidential administration, a federal agency, or as a key staffer on Capitol Hill. Being left out of this ecosystem at the entry level restricts economic and social mobility for these advocates and therefore the opportunity for access to the leadership levels of policymaking.

Recognizing that early-career roles are foundational for building a career in technology policy, in 2019 Public Knowledge launched the Technology Policy Diversity Project to study racial and ethnic diversity in early-career roles and the hiring processes in technology policy nonprofits that seek to influence national policy. Researchers have studied diversity in Capitol Hill senior staff, leadership and boards of directors of nonprofits, technology companies, and others. But no study has focused exclusively on racial diversity among early-career roles in technology policy nonprofits, which are feeders for decision making positions in public policy.

The Project includes a survey focused on early-career opportunities, such as internships and fellowships, a webinar with tech policy leaders and aspiring job seekers, and a resource list of career services offices at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) to share job opportunities. A list of Tribal Colleges and Universities is also available in the [resource list](#).

The Project found that:

- Job opportunities are circulated primarily within the tech policy groups and their networks, so access to these networks is critical.
- The content of job descriptions can influence the applicant pool, which can decrease or increase the pool of diverse applicants.

- Commenters suggested approaches to improving the hiring process to attract and hire diverse candidates.
- Many tech policy groups offer early-career on-ramps, such as internships and fellowships, but they could also add externships to increase opportunities.
- Although most opportunities, including internships, are paid, the rate of pay is low, creating a barrier to entry for individuals from less affluent backgrounds.
- Organizations faced funding and other challenges in hiring early-career positions.
- There are limitations to the data on early-career hiring in technology policy nonprofits; encouraging data collection could increase diversity.

The Technology Policy Diversity Project

Early-career roles are foundational for building a career in technology policy, so in 2019, Public Knowledge launched the Technology Policy Diversity Project (“Project”) to study racial and ethnic diversity in early-career roles and the hiring processes in technology policy nonprofits that seek to influence national policy. The Project produced a survey focused on early-career opportunities, such as internships and fellowships, that offer a pathway to senior policy-shaping roles that influence the laws and regulations for the country. We recognize that the availability of such opportunities captures one dimension of the barriers people of color face in entering technology policy roles. Other factors, such as the workplace environment, also shape a person’s experiences and opportunities later in their career.

The following definitions were adopted for the Project:

Tech Policy: The laws and regulations that govern internet access or any online activity, including data stored or transferred electronically; telecommunications services like broadband access; digital media; digital platforms like social media channels; cybersecurity; or artificial intelligence issues.

Tech Policy Role: Defined as a technology policy internship, externship, full-time fellowship, or entry-level position in which the majority of duties include one or more of the following: technology policy research, analysis, and/or writing; work with coalitions or other parties toward a policy goal; outreach

to elected officials or government agencies in order to influence technology policy; and outreach to the media and public through marketing communications activities to raise awareness of technology policy issues.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity:¹ The population of people who belong to different racial and ethnic groups such as: African Americans or Blacks; Hispanics or Latino/as; East Asians; Southeast Asians; South Asians; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders; Middle Eastern/North Africans; and American Indians and Alaska Natives.

The Project represents a starting point in increasing transparency about racial and ethnic representation. The Project's goals are to:

1. Learn about the types of early-career opportunities available in tech policy nonprofits and the diversity within these roles;
2. Discover if and how organizations are taking steps to increase diversity;
3. Learn how organizations describe their challenges in increasing diversity; and
4. Compile resources for employers to expand their recruitment networks.

In addition to this research, Public Knowledge began hosting webinars with tech policy leaders and aspiring job seekers to discuss the variety of job roles within tech policy. To help employers target more diverse hiring pools, Public Knowledge compiled a resource list of career services offices at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) to share job opportunities. A list of Tribal Colleges and Universities is also available on the resource list.

The Project benefited from individuals who spoke with Public Knowledge staff between December 2019 and July 2020, and shared their observations on the state of diversity in tech policy; perspectives on barriers people of color face in gaining tech policy jobs; and ideas for areas of research for this study. They also offered feedback about the survey questions and the focus areas for the research. Throughout this report, we refer to these individuals as **Study Commenters**; these individuals work as tech policy professionals in nonprofit or business sectors; as staff in government agencies; as Congressional staff; and as researchers that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, but they were not part of the survey group. Commenters who gave permission to share their names are identified in this report.

Those who responded to the survey, representing nonprofit organizations, are referred to as **Respondents**.

To bring greater objectivity to the survey and report, and to ensure that editorial decisions were not inappropriately influenced by Public Knowledge's internal practices or metrics, we did not participate in this survey. However, many of the survey questions, and the responses offered by participating organizations, encouraged us to reflect on our own practices of increasing diversity.

Method

The goal of the survey was to learn about diversity in early-career on-ramps in tech policy nonprofits, many of which are based in Washington, D.C. Those invited to participate in the survey represent a convenience sample, as these groups have become known to Public Knowledge through coalition work, demonstrated leadership on tech policy issues through original research reports, or participation in regulatory proceedings. We identified 31 organizations with stated missions that include issue areas related to technology policy as defined in this report. Fifteen of the groups are entirely focused on technology policy; of these groups, two groups are focused on tech policy and its intersection with communities of color. Sixteen of the organizations have broader missions that include tech policy issue areas. There may be organizations that seek to influence tech policy that are not captured in this report.

The organizations that responded to the survey focused on tech policy issues such as broadband access, broadband adoption, free expression, diversity in media, telecommunications, online privacy, platform accountability, and algorithmic bias. Four of the responding organizations employed fewer than 20 employees, two organizations employed between 21 and 50 employees, and two organizations employed more than 100 employees.

Public Knowledge conducted the survey using an online survey tool from July 27, 2020 through October 31, 2020. The survey consisted of 18 questions and covered broad categories of the hiring process. Such categories include the visibility of tech policy opportunities, the description of job postings, and the process by which organizations obtain feedback about the workplace environment. Survey Respondents were also asked questions about the number of opportunities available in early-career roles in recent years (January 2017- June 2020); the racial and ethnic representation in early-career roles; and the compensation offered for internships and fellowships.

The survey questions were informed by interviews with thought leaders, research on diversity, and methods adopted by other sectors, such as academia. Some of the survey focus areas were inspired by conversations with nonprofit professionals who focus on diversity and inclusion; researchers who have developed diversity surveys; and tech policy professionals in the public and private sectors. Some Study Commenters were asked about their observations about the level of diversity in tech policy, and what they believed contributed to the lack of representation; others were asked to share their experience in developing surveys and engaging participants.

“We want people who are most affected by a problem to be part of the solution to that problem and fight to ensure a diverse range of people at the policymaking table.”

Why Diversity Matters

Early job opportunities can serve as an on-ramp for individuals from marginalized communities to start a career in policymaking and at the same time represent the voices of their communities in the policies that affect their lives.

Many of the policy advocacy groups who make decisions that impact society, shape public opinion, and influence issues, do not fully represent the public in terms of racial diversity. The individuals who serve in policymaking positions are part of an opportunity ecosystem that allows them to make public policy decisions that affect everyone, and to climb a ladder of increasingly influential jobs at policymaking institutions, raising the volume of their voices and improving their career prospects. **Being left out of this ecosystem at the entry level restricts economic and social mobility and therefore the opportunity for access to the leadership levels of policymaking.** *Beyond inequities in career outcomes, the lack of diverse representation in policymaking often results in policies that fail to consider the needs of everyone.*

Former Public Knowledge Communications Justice Fellow Alisa Valentin commented in a blog post, “The lack of diversity in tech policy means that regulators and lawmakers make policy decisions that impact marginalized groups from a perspective that is not inclusive of the viewpoints of these communities.” She also noted that according to [Nielsen](#), Black people own more devices that are dependent on the internet to operate (smartphones, smart speaker devices, smart televisions, tablets) than other racial groups, so there should be more Black people in policy debates about digital redlining, digital literacy, rural broadband infrastructure, and mergers.² But who is in the room to make decisions that affect communities of color? Valentin and others have observed that in many cases, there may be only one or a few people of color in larger policymaking meetings and events related to topics like digital inclusion, artificial intelligence, content moderation, privacy, and intellectual property, that may have a disproportionate impact on communities of color. One Survey Respondent expressed, “It is a sad state to see that there are so few people who look like the majority of the consumers they claim to advocate on behalf of. Building a pipeline of people who are passionate about making a change for their own communities who have been historically in the shadows, is key to sustainable policy movement.”

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Another Survey Respondent stated, “We want people who are most affected by a problem to be part of the solution to that problem and fight to ensure a diverse range of people at the policymaking table.” Conversations with people of color who work in tech policy, including many in leadership positions in public and nonprofit organizations, affirmed the necessity of increasing racial diversity in the tech policy space. One Study Commenter urged, “Go where the problem is”, when asked about the merits of focusing research on racial and ethnic diversity in technology policy. In speaking about the importance of representation in tech policy, another Study Commenter expressed, “Just because you care about people of color doesn’t mean that you know what’s best for people of color.”

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The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies studied racial diversity among top staff in Senate personal offices in 2020. The Joint Center reasoned that chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors are key because these positions play an essential role in the Senate and often provide “political and policy expertise, develop legislation, meet with constituents, act as surrogates for senators, manage Senate offices, and hire, supervise, and terminate employees.”³ The study noted that the lack of diversity “impairs the ability of senators to understand the diverse perspectives of their constituencies.”⁴ A lack of diversity in Senate offices “warrants special attention because Senate decisions affect everyone in the nation.”⁵ *The study found that while people of color make up 40 percent of the U.S. population, they only make up 11 percent of top jobs in Senate personal offices.*⁶ *Even in the offices representing states with high numbers of Black and Latina/o residents, there are few top staffers of color. In 10 states where African Americans represent, on average, almost 30 percent of the population, they hold only 3.5 percent of key Senate jobs.*⁷ *Latina/os represent, on average, nearly 30 percent, of the population in 10 states, and they hold 13.6 percent of top jobs in Senate offices representing those states.*⁸

Researchers have also studied diversity in the nonprofit sector,

journalism, and in major tech companies. In one recent survey examining diversity in nonprofits, 60 percent of nonprofit CEOs believed that diversity in senior leadership was “very” or “extremely” important in order for the organization to achieve its goals; however, only 17 percent indicated that senior leadership within their organization was diverse.⁹ Other studies have focused on journalism and have found that people of color are largely underrepresented in newsrooms across the country.¹⁰ Without representation in the media, journalism misses diverse perspectives and people of color miss an opportunity to participate and bring the voices of their communities to the public square. Historical coverage of protests and of predominantly Black neighborhoods demonstrate how the lack of diversity in journalism advances harmful stereotypes.¹¹ The editorial decisions about which stories merit national attention can also reflect racial bias. Many observers have noted the lack of diversity in the technology business sector as well. The percentage of Blacks and Latinos in technical roles has grown slowly -- within some companies by only one percentage point -- between 2014 and 2019.¹² The proportion of Blacks and Latinos in technical roles at some major tech companies was as little as 2 percent and 3 percent, respectively, in some years.^{13 14 15}

Why Technology Policy?

Representation in tech policymaking is critical because technology increasingly affects every aspect of life. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the importance of access to broadband as the world has gone remote, but communities of color still face barriers to access and affordability. *People of color are less likely to have home broadband service,¹⁶ and 35 percent of households on Tribal lands lack access to high-speed broadband,¹⁷ which has exacerbated the consequences of COVID-19 for these communities.*¹⁸ *Further, even where broadband is available to low-income communities, underinvestment in technology in these communities prevents residents from accessing the internet at speeds comparable to those in more affluent areas.*¹⁹

The presumption of race-neutral technology perpetuates inequities in various forms, ranging from health care to predictive policing.²⁰ Algorithmic bias is one example of how technology can perpetuate structural racism embedded in the data it relies on. Harmful biases become embedded in predictive models when the data used to develop it reflect historical bias. Advertising structures on digital platforms can also perpetuate racial inequities by relying on proxies for protected classes to target certain populations and exclude others.²¹

The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 demonstrations protesting excessive force by law enforcement have brought systemic racism into focus in the United States. Responding to the imperative to correct historical injustices requires us to accept that racism can be perpetuated in ways that are not obvious, and that policies that appear to be race-neutral may not be. Because the development and deployment of technology takes place in a societal environment of systemic inequality, **technology policy must be developed with the recognition that people of color can offer valuable perspectives that inform the development and implementation of technological tools and systems**; however, to have a voice in policy, more people of color need to be in the rooms where policy is made.

The Study

Summary of Findings

- ***Job opportunities are circulated primarily within the tech policy groups and their networks, so access to these networks is critical.***
- ***The content of job descriptions can influence the applicant pool, decreasing or increasing the pool of diverse applicants.***
- ***Commenters suggested approaches for improving the hiring process to attract and hire diverse candidates.***
- ***Many tech policy groups offer early-career on-ramps, such as internships and fellowships, but they could add externships to increase opportunities.***
- ***Although most opportunities, including internships, are paid, the rate of pay is low, creating a barrier to entry for individuals from less affluent backgrounds.***
- ***Organizations faced funding and other challenges in hiring early-career positions.***
- ***There are limitations to the data on early-career hiring in technology policy nonprofits; encouraging data collection could increase diversity.***

Findings²²

Job opportunities are circulated primarily within the tech policy groups and their networks. Postings are shared secondarily with other recruiting services and networks, and to a lesser extent, with minority serving institutions and networks.

The first connection point between an aspiring tech policy advocate and a tech policy organization is the job announcement for an open position. Where and how that posting is shared determines the applicant pool. Recent data shows that employers access a significant percentage of new hires through employee referrals.²³ Employee social and professional networks may reflect the current demographic makeup of an organization, and researchers have noted that social networks remain powerful in shaping career opportunities in ways that perpetuate racial inequality.²⁴ *One study found that, even when Black job seekers utilized their networks in the job search at similar rates to white jobseekers, Black job seekers are less likely than white job seekers “to know someone at the companies to which they are submitting applications”.*²⁵

Job Announcements for Early-Career Roles

To learn more about how job opportunities are shared, the survey asked how organizations shared job announcements for early-career roles. The most frequently selected response was “through communication with other tech policy organizations.” The majority of the Survey respondents said they used that method “very often.”

This means that hiring is most often initiated through a network of people in tech policy positions, who may recommend their own interns, externs, fellows, and contacts in their professional and personal networks for positions at other organizations. *Survey research has shown that individuals’ personal networks tend to be made up of people of the same racial identity.*²⁶ If these originating networks are not diverse, mining them for job candidates is not likely to yield a large number of diverse applicants. If tech policy organizations recruit primarily within their own community, job seekers may need to first break into this system to begin an upward career trajectory. If opportunities are posted with minority-serving institutions and networks, the pools may become more diverse.

A number of respondents noted in comments that they share their job postings on social media. In this case, the demographics of an organization’s social media following are important. One Survey Respondent with an organizational focus on diversity noted that it has an extensive social media following, many of whom share an interest in their mission and are from diverse backgrounds. Conversely, if an organization’s social media following is not diverse, efforts to recruit candidates through social media may not result in diverse applicants.

Some organizations noted that they share job postings with university professors and academic institutions. Again, applications may mirror the diversity of these professors and institutions, whether diverse or not.

Expanding Networks

The survey asked whether respondents share job announcements with minority-serving institutions (HBCUs and HSIs) and networks (academic clubs or associations for people of color). Few of the respondents shared with both groups “very often.” Others shared with institutions less frequently.

One Study Commenter noted: “Tech policy opportunities reward those who are well-networked. Expanding recruitment to a wider range of institutions, including academic institutions that primarily serve people of color, is one way organizations can proactively increase the diversity of the candidate pool.”

“One way tech policy organizations can address the racial gap in networking is by building enduring networks with groups and institutions that primarily serve people of color.”

One way tech policy organizations can address the racial gap in networking is by building enduring networks with groups and institutions that primarily serve people of color. In addition to sharing job announcements with minority-serving academic institutions, organizations could consider hosting on-site events or virtual events to increase the visibility of tech policy career paths and help students of color forge relationships with tech policy leaders.

To address the tendency for organizations to share within their networks, another way to create more diversity in the field is to offer more early-career slots, such as internships and externships (discussed later -- a learning position in an

organization), where individuals can establish a foothold, prove themselves, share their resumes, find mentors, and begin to build relationships.

Several of the organizations said they shared job postings with Glassdoor, LinkedIn, Idealist, or Indeed “very often.” The user demographic data on race and ethnicity for these sites could not be sourced, and to our knowledge, such information is not a data collection point for user profiles on these sites. However, information such as location, spoken language skills, and university affiliation are attributes that can be filtered by recruiters on LinkedIn.²⁷

Research suggests that the content of job descriptions can influence the applicant pool.

The content of job postings, including the ways in which qualifications are characterized, may influence the applicant pool. In an entry-level role in tech policy, aspiring advocates may assume they need advanced technical or legal skills to effectively compete for jobs, and some candidates may self-select out of the pool.²⁸ Traditional hiring best practices encourage full evaluation of essential qualifications and, if necessary, to distinguish between “required” and “preferred” qualifications.²⁹ Resource guides for advancing racial equity in the workplace have also identified role description and qualification development as an area of opportunity for increasing racial diversity, and they encourage the practice of conducting job analyses to ensure that the minimum qualifications accurately reflect the essential job functions.³⁰ The practice of focusing on job qualification development, among other considerations, has been adopted by some academic institutions to expand the pool of diverse applicants for faculty positions.³¹

Our study showed that the majority of organizations already distinguish between essential and non-essential skills or experiences in the job description. One organization lists skills that are only necessary for the role and does not add “preferred” skills or experiences to the job role description.

People of color may not recognize ‘tech policy’ as a sphere that connects their passion and interests. However, if [a tech policy issue] can be tied to a pressing issue that may disproportionately harm people of color, then [the job role] may resonate. Frame the tech policy issue in the context of social justice.

Commenters suggested approaches to improving the hiring process to attract and hire diverse candidates.

Discussions with Survey Commenters and research from other sectors highlighted other aspects of job description content that may affect the diversity of applicant pools, and offered the following suggestions:

- *Make tech policy more relevant to social justice or other relevant issues.* Study Commenters suggested that including language in a job description that links issues of tech policy to issues affecting underrepresented groups may be an effective strategy to expand the applicant pool, and evidence from other sectors highlights this as a promising approach. One Study Commenter noted that one barrier to increasing diversity is that, “People of color may not recognize ‘tech policy’ as a sphere that connects their passion and interests. However, if [a tech policy issue] can be tied to a pressing issue that may disproportionately harm people of color, then [the job role] may resonate. Frame the tech policy issue in the context of social justice.” Connecting tech policy issues to racial justice signals to applicants that their experience navigating the world as a person of color has value they can bring to the role.

A report conducted by the University of California at Berkeley examining data from their faculty search process found that writing job descriptions that linked issues of gender, race, or ethnicity to existing taxonomy in a research field yielded the “strongest positive statistical correlation with greater diversity” at various stages of the hiring process.³² (For example, framing labor research as “labor and women’s history” as opposed to simply “labor history.”)

- *Consider transferable skills.* Employers may want to look more closely at an applicant’s experience and think about which skills and experiences working on unrelated policy issues may be transferable to the field of tech policy.³³
- *Consider removing educational requirements from job postings if they are not necessary to do the job.* While educational credentials can support a candidate’s qualifications, the requirement can discourage otherwise qualified applicants with considerable work experience or subject matter expertise in an issue area.
- *Consider the real qualifications necessary to do the job.* Conduct a thoughtful assessment to determine which qualifications are truly essential to the role as opposed to qualifications that candidates have traditionally brought to the role. Expanding the applicant pool may require employers to consider which desirable qualifications can be learned on the job.

It’s not aptitude; it’s exposure. How can [people of color] see themselves in a role they didn’t know existed?

- *Visibility of tech policy careers is important for attracting diverse talent.* Some thought leaders raised the importance of the visibility of tech policy career pathways and job opportunities. One Congressional staffer, who contributes to the Congressional Black Caucus’ effort to bring more people of color into the tech industry, emphasized the need to discuss public policy advocacy as a career path at the early levels in education, stating, “It’s not aptitude; it’s exposure. How can [people of color] see themselves

in a role they didn't know existed?" Likewise, a faculty member at Howard University School of Law spoke to the importance of ensuring the variety of career pathways are visible to students, stating that, "Law students don't always know what lawyers can do." She also offered some ideas on how nonprofits can build a presence at schools by presenting at panels, "When I have a good panel, a student will come up to me and say, 'I never thought of that as a career.' It is essential for nonprofits to come, especially to schools where there isn't coursework specialized in [the nonprofit's policy focus]." She offered that nonprofits could also consider pitching an idea for a class to the dean of academic affairs and offering staff to teach as adjuncts.

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Respondents shared approaches to improving the hiring process to attract and hire diverse candidates.

In addition to the information the study collected about the hiring process, a number of Respondents offered feedback based on their experience. Below are those responses.

- *Increasing opportunities for remote work will “attract talent where they are.”* Making remote work optional for more positions is one strategy employers can use to expand the candidate pool, opening the door for more candidates from diverse backgrounds to apply for a role they may not otherwise consider.

- *Ensuring that the applicant pool reflects diversity before moving to the selection stage of hiring is key to hiring.* If organizations refrain from moving forward with the interview process until the candidate pool is proportionally diverse, it may increase the likelihood that a diverse candidate will ultimately be hired. One Respondent suggested using a modified “Rooney Rule” where at least one person of color would be considered for each job opening, although there are some limitations to that approach, and ensuring a diverse candidate pool meets the same goal.
- *Disclosing salary ranges and starting salary in job postings.* One Survey Respondent noted that they are “explicit with applicants about our salary ranges, about the equity in our compensation program, and about the fact that we no longer negotiate starting salaries to ensure parity and equity in our overall compensation program.”
- *Streamlining the application process.* Focus on standardizing the application materials. For example, instead of asking for cover letters, ask a few questions of all applicants. Do not ask for references until later in the process.

Many tech policy groups offer early-career on-ramps, such as internships and fellowships, but they could add externships to increase opportunities.

The majority of respondents offered early-career roles, the most common being fellowships. Across the groups, they hired more than 130 people for early-career roles; the majority of these roles were fellowships. This hiring pattern shows the prevalence and importance of early-career roles in these organizations. The number of hires is remarkably high considering that most of the respondents’ organizations have fewer than 20 full-time staff members.

None of the organizations responded that they had hosted externs between 2017 and 2020. Externs are usually students who gain academic credit for serving part time at a nonprofit. Externships can be valuable for students, as they offer many of the same growth opportunities as internships. Organizations typically develop externships by partnering with academic institutions, introducing new early-career advocates to the field while sparing the organization the financial burden of hosting an internship.

Although most opportunities, including internships, are paid, the rate of pay is low, creating a barrier to entry for individuals from less affluent backgrounds.

Racial wealth inequality perpetuates gaps in career advancement when young adults with access to family funds can take advantage of early-career opportunities, while those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds cannot afford to pursue such opportunities. Full-time fellowship opportunities, for example, are often foundational in helping those in their early careers build networks and explore different issue areas in tech policy. When these opportunities can be funded by providing livable wages, it helps people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds pursue these opportunities without the concern that they cannot support themselves. One Study Commenter, who began her tech policy career during a fellowship, stated that, “Meaningful wages matter.”

“Meaningful wages matter.”

Although some organizations declined to share precise salary data, all of the organizations that responded compensated their interns and fellows and reported a wide variety of pay. Some used hourly wages while others provided a stipend for a period of time. As to hourly wages, in order to create uniformity, we extrapolated using the standard formula of hourly rate times 40 hours per week times 50 weeks per year to compare annualized pay. We did the same for fellowships.

Reported internship hourly pay was \$15-\$16 per hour, so \$30,000 to \$32,000 per year; one respondent offered a stipend of \$1,500 but a time period for that was not specified. Both stipends and hourly wages were reported for fellowships; the most common pay was \$17,000 to \$30,000 per year, annualized, with one higher, at \$40,000, and another at \$90,000.

For those organizations that offered a flat fee, there is no indication of the length of time the intern or fellow worked. A common length for internships is 10 weeks. Based on the amounts offered, it is possible to speculate that the fellowships were summer fellowships, which would also be 10 weeks. Based on these assumptions, for illustrative purposes, the following demonstrates annualized salaries using a formula of the stipend divided by 10 weeks, times 50 work weeks, resulting in annualized pay between \$7,500 and \$20,000.

Many law schools offer public interest stipends for students who do public interest legal internships. A common stipend is \$4,000 for 10 weeks, or \$20,000 annualized.

Many students from middle or low-income backgrounds, who rely solely on their own wages for living expenses, would find it difficult to live on these wages. For law students with debt and specialized knowledge, this would be especially difficult. The cost of living in Washington, D.C., is among the highest in the nation, with the median cost of rent at \$2,000 per month or \$24,000 per year.³⁴ Minimum wage in D.C. is \$15 per hour, the average wage is \$33 per hour, and the average salary is \$69,000 per year.³⁵ Increasing internship and fellowship pay to a rate that would cover more of the cost of living would allow a wider pool of candidates to serve, and possibly increase diversity.

“Given the suggestions that funding is a barrier to compensation, we asked whether organizations would apply for grants to exclusively fund early-career opportunities, and they overwhelmingly said they would.”

Survey Respondents faced funding and other challenges in hiring early-career positions.

The study asked organizations how they fund their internships and fellowships. Of those who responded, most used a combination of internal funds and external funds, followed by those who used internal funds only. Respondents shared the challenges in offering early-career roles, including funding to offer competitive compensation and lack of internal staff capacity to properly oversee, administer, support, and evaluate a year-round internship or fellowship program. Given the suggestions that funding is a barrier to compensation, we asked

whether organizations would apply for grants to exclusively fund early-career opportunities, and they overwhelmingly said they would.

There are limitations to the data on early-career hiring in technology policy nonprofits; encouraging data collection could increase racial and ethnic diversity.

We had hoped to gain a picture of diversity in early-career roles across the community of tech policy organizations in Washington, however, of the 31 groups, only eight responded to the survey. The study showed that only three groups consistently collected demographic data, and two of those groups began the practice in 2019. Of those three respondents, two have racial equity centered missions and one has done a major initiative on diversity. Of the remaining respondents, five did not have diversity data, but did contribute other valuable information.

Organizations that responded have, at a minimum, discussed ways to increase diversity; most have developed measurable goals to increase diversity and implemented strategies that guide the hiring and recruitment process.

One of the challenges we faced was that the survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic time period, when most or all of the organizations had closed their physical offices and their staff were available only remotely. To complicate matters, the remote nature of the workplace meant that many organizations had less access to other colleagues and to non-electronic records.

While quantitative data was elusive due to small sample size, lack of recordkeeping at some organizations, and reluctance of others to respond, the study revealed, among other things, the challenges and steps organizations have taken to increase diversity as well as the type of early-career opportunities offered. The findings are limited and cannot be generalized; however, we share these findings to bring attention to organizational efforts to increase diversity. These initial findings may also form a basis for additional research that explores hiring practices of tech policy nonprofits.

After the close of the survey, we followed up with the organizations that did not reply to learn more about the obstacles they may have faced in responding to the survey. Some individuals shared that they were unable to devote time to completing the survey, but expressed interest in participating at a later time. Others declined to participate in the survey,

citing that formal processes had not yet permitted them to disclose certain demographic information.

To gain a complete glimpse of the diversity trends within tech policy, organizations could consider, among other things, discussing internal policies that will permit them to collect and share aggregated information related to race and ethnicity.

Respondents reported 22 hires in racial/ethnic categories between January 1, 2017 and June 30, 2020; 17 of these hires were persons of color and five were white. Of the organizations that responded, those with a focus on racial equity and/or collected diversity data, were more likely to report diversity in their ranks.

Of those respondents that *did not* collect data, one had six interns, two entry-level positions, and 35 fellows, one respondent had two fellows and three entry-level positions, one respondent had 43 fellows, one respondent had 12 interns, four fellows, and four entry-level positions. One respondent did not offer early-career roles in tech policy during the time period specified in the survey question, and did not answer demographic questions.

Of the eight groups responding to the survey, one group did not offer early-career roles between January 1, 2017 and June 30, 2020, and did not answer any questions demographic information. The data above reflects responses from seven of the eight responding groups.

In total, those early-career advocates who were reported in the study but for whom there is no demographic information total 117. Figure 1 shows the distribution of race/ethnicity among respondents, but all of the responses except “unsure” and “unreported” were from just three of the responding groups discussed above. Respondents were given the option to select “unsure” if they reported that their organization collected

race/ethnicity, but the identity of the individual remained unknown (because the employee chose not to disclose this information or for other reasons). The number of employees whose identities were “Unreported” represents those individuals in organizations that have no policy of collecting racial or ethnic demographic information.

Race/Ethnicity in Early-Career Roles Across Organizations Surveyed

Figure 1

Race or Ethnicity	Number of People in Early-Career Roles	Percent of Total Early-Career Roles
African American or Black	5	3.6
Hispanic or Latino/a	7	5
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
Middle Eastern or North African	0	0
East Asian	1	.7
Southeast Asian	0	0
South Asian	4	2.9
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0
White	5	3.6
Multiracial	0	0
Unsure (Unknown to the organization)	91	65.5
Unreported	26	18.7

*** Of the eight groups responding to the survey, one group did not offer early-career roles between January 1, 2017 and June 30, 2020, and did not answer any questions demographic information. The data above reflects responses from seven of the eight responding groups.

Topics for Future Research

Public Knowledge encourages research that builds on aspects of this study, or explores new topics that may provide greater insight into the barriers people of color face in advancing their careers in tech policy.

Workplace Environment/Organizational Culture

The workplace environment can influence the retention of people of color in tech policy organizations. Study Commenters emphasized the importance of ensuring that people from diverse backgrounds are empowered to voice their perspectives. Although we did not feel that we could fully capture an organization's approach to creating an inclusive culture in the form of a single survey question, the survey asks employers if they have a process for getting feedback and if so, we asked them to characterize their process for doing so.

Survey Respondents shared the following methods of obtaining employee feedback about the workplace environment: exit interviews; annual engagement surveys; periodic all-staff surveys, performance reviews, one-on-one check-in meetings; impromptu team huddles; and structured, guided organizational mapping/assessments. We did not obtain data on which questions were asked, how the structure of the conversations were modeled, or the degree of success of these processes (e.g., the percentage of employees who participated in staff surveys). Future research may add additional insight into how these processes are implemented, or expand the focus to capture other practices that shape organizational culture.

Methods For Collection and Use of Demographic Information

Collecting demographic information can support an organization's commitment to hiring and promoting people from diverse backgrounds. During this study, we learned that some organizations do not survey employees to obtain racial demographic information. Although we did not ask organizations what their reasons were for not collecting this information, a variety of considerations may contribute to their decision, such as: uncertainty about how to administer such a survey to obtain the information or which demographic categories should be used; how to communicate the way the information will be used; or concerns about confidentiality. Future research may help illuminate the reasons some organizations choose not to collect this information and identify best practices for obtaining and using demographic information that captures race and ethnicity.

Conclusion

As technology becomes increasingly integrated into our daily lives, it is especially important that people of color participate in policy discussions and are empowered to raise questions about who benefits and who is harmed by policy decisions. As we have shared in this report, many people of color do not believe it is sufficient to have well-meaning people advocate for policies they believe are equitable; people of color must also be in the room where organizations are making policy decisions. Early-career opportunities offer people of color a pathway to building careers in tech policy, and we hope this report illuminates some of the barriers to entry. This project has inspired Public Knowledge to reflect on our practices for bringing people of color into tech policy, and we hope that the findings in this report inspire others as well.



Learning Resources

The following resources may be helpful in beginning to discuss and implement diversity plans within your organization.

- National Council of Nonprofits: [Why Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Matter for Nonprofits](#). This site offers a comprehensive reading list of diversity reports, action plans, and case studies for nonprofits seeking to increase diversity.
- Julie Nelson and Syreeta Tyrell, [Public Sector Jobs Opportunities for Advancing Racial Equity](#) (2016). In this paper, the authors discuss barriers to workforce equity and offer strategies for improvement.
- Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race Equity: Minimum Qualifications (Blog): [Best Practices in Recruitment and Selection Advancing Racial Equity in Multnomah County](#) (2015) This blog post offers a case study in transforming hiring practices and offers best practices for developing minimum qualifications for job roles.

Case Study: Free Press

The survey reached organizations at different places in their journey to bring more diversity to their staff. Free Press offers a case study describing its efforts to recruit people from diverse backgrounds and foster a work environment that supports diversity.



Free Press is committed to realizing an equitable and just media system that protects the rights of everyone to connect and communicate. To do this we openly acknowledge the historical racial disparities in media access, and work to ensure race is a central issue in the debate over media and telecommunications policies. We focus on these powerful platforms and tools because they have an outsized influence not just on our political system but on the kind of society we will have and the lives we will lead.

We believe that racial equity must be a core strategy to build a more just media system, and to realize a just society. The only way we'll succeed is with a broad movement of people that is representative of the nation's diversity and that amplifies the voices of people of color on key issues to envision a more just and equitable future.

Free Press works to center race and racial equity within all facets of our work and organization, ensuring that we apply a racial-justice analysis to the issues we work on. We regularly evaluate how our staff time and budget allocations to various campaigns and programs will further our efforts to improve the lives of people of color. We are also committed to evolving internal organizational culture to make Free Press a more equitable place to work. We are committed to racial equity at the organizational, programmatic and inter-personal level.

In 2013, we began deep analysis and introspection on racial and gender equity at the organization and brought in an organizational-development consultant to evaluate and help us. We formed our first internal working group on race equity that year. Since then we have expanded our work and public-facing communications on race in response to and in collaboration with a growing racial-justice movement that sees a direct connection between the media system and the struggle for racial justice.

To integrate an equity frame more fully into all aspects of our work, including programmatic work, fundraising, operations and organizational development and culture-shifting, we convened an internal Race Equity Working Group (REWG) in 2015 to work collaboratively with our Executive Team to set organizational race-equity goals.

With intentional race equity priority setting, investments in staff training, coaching and leadership development at all levels of the organization we are seeing results in the effort to diversify our staff and boards and to increase the leadership and agency of people of color at all levels of the organization.

When we started our focus on this work in 2013, our board and staff composition were predominantly white. As of September 2020 our organization is now much more diverse, with more people of color holding higher levels of authority and responsibility. Our board is now 40% people of color and 40% female. Our staff is now 45% people of color, 60% women and 9% non-binary. In January 2020 our boards approved a Co-CEO leadership structure with a Mexican American woman joining a white man at the helm. We have also heavily invested in staff leadership development. Our executive team is now two-thirds women and 50% people of color. We also have significantly increased representation of people of color at our manager and director staff levels.

We understand that diversity alone is not enough. Many of our innovations have been focused on how we attract, recruit, onboard, develop and retain staff of color. In recent years, we've focused on innovating our hiring practices to minimize bias in evaluating applicants for internships, fellowships, or regular positions.

- To increase pay equity, we've stopped asking for pay history and we've started posting salary ranges and expected starting salary in all position postings. We've instituted a practice of being explicit with applicants about our salary ranges, about the equity in our compensation program, and about the fact that we no longer negotiate starting salaries to ensure parity and equity in our overall compensation program.
- We've expanded our outreach efforts, including asking all staff to amplify our job opportunities in their personal and professional networks. As our staff has become more diverse, we are reaching a wider pool of candidates.

- We've adjusted our application processes to streamline the amount of information collected in the applications, doing away with cover letters, and asking all applicants the same questions. While we've never required traditional academic credentials for most of our positions, we state more clearly now that work experience may be valued in the same ways that an academic degree may be.
- Each of our position descriptions makes clear that applicants are expected to advance equity through their work at Free Press, and asks applicants to explain how they have demonstrated doing so through previous experience.
- Our initial review of applications is conducted via "blind review" to further reduce reviewer bias, and we ensure diversity in the teams of people involved in application review and candidate interviews.
- And when setting initial compensation and adjusting compensation over time, we follow a compensation policy and program that is designed to ensure equal pay for equal work and to provide pathways for advancement within the organization.

As our organization's staff composition shifts from year to year we've found it is important to continue to restate our vision for race equity work and to ensure that new staff are provided with a solid orientation to the training, tools, language and processes that have become part of our organizational culture.

We have shaped our annual staff retreat to focus on race equity and related all-staff training and skill building. We sent our entire staff to the 2016 Facing Race conference. And we've regularly engaged consultants and coaches from Allied Media Projects, Movement Strategy Center, Race Forward, and Road Map, among others. We have invested in professional development through workshops and training offered by AORTA, Adrienne Maree Brown, Loretta Ross, Interaction Institute for Social Change, Momentum, Management Center, Rockwood Leadership Program, and Strozzi Institute, among others. We actively work with Race Forward's Choice Points framework and the Habits of White Supremacy antidotes framework.

As financial and fundraising challenges (and successes) impact our organization, we've doubled down on our commitment to securing external support to deepen our capacity to do this work well, balancing investment for coaching and training for

specific individuals with investment in learning opportunities and professional development for all staff. Peer-to-peer knowledge exchange is also in the mix.

Maintaining an open, curious, courageous stance in our effort to create and foster a multiracial organizational culture is essential. This work is not easy. It requires vision and leadership and ongoing care and attention. It requires investments of time and money. It requires introspection, vulnerability, and critique. It requires slowing down and speeding up. Many times it feels like we are taking a few steps forward, only to realize that there is a mountain still to climb, or that we've slid backwards a bit and have to retrace our steps.

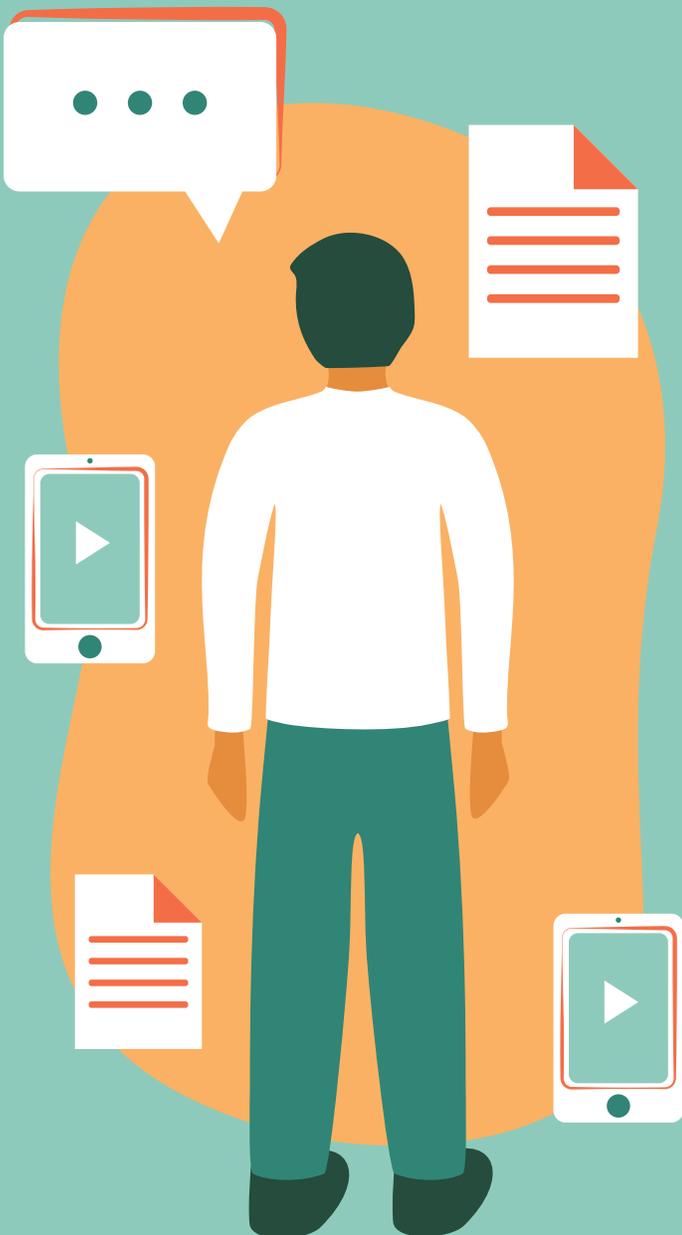
We're challenging (and being challenged by) centuries of systemic racism that is at the root cause of injustice and inequity in our media system, in our own organization, and in the constellation of allies, funders, activists, academic institutions and business groups that comprise our sector.

The call for a more just media has never been louder. The need for a truly diverse sector of media and tech organizations collaborating together to build the world we dream of has never been clearer. Free Press' race equity journey will be ongoing as there is always more work to do.

By: Kimberly Longey, Chief Operating Officer, September 2020

Early-Career Spotlight

It is important that people of color have access to opportunities and are compensated fairly early in their careers. Research has explored the ways in which disadvantages early in a person's career can compound over time³⁶, but this phenomenon should not be surprising to the casual observer. The following stories show how people of color in the tech policy space used an early-career opportunity to ascend to more senior policy-shaping roles in their career. Their stories reveal how their roles aided them in learning about a variety of tech policy issues, building networks, and gaining mentors.



Dominique Harrison, Aspen Institute

The most significant role that contributed to my career advancement was my role as a project manager at the Aspen Institute in the Aspen Digital program (formerly Communications & Society). Five years later, I have advanced to project director, a position and title that has given me the opportunity and space to expand the impact and reach of my work.

After my Ph.D. program at Howard University, it was important to me to work at a nonprofit where I could apply my knowledge and experience in the field of tech policy. My dissertation explores gender awareness among stakeholders of Jamaica's Information Communication and Technology (ICT) policy and includes interviews with individuals from civil society, government, and private sector organizations in Jamaica's ICT field in order to determine whether the needs and interests of Jamaican women are being considered.

At the Aspen Institute, I had the opportunity to speak with myriad stakeholders within government, nonprofit and private sectors -- including the Federal Communications Commission, Comcast, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Microsoft, Free Press -- to advance equitable and inclusive tech policies on behalf of all communities in the U.S.

Over the past few years, I have expanded my network within the field, developed new skills and thinking, and gained a close friend and mentor with the same educational background and passion for tech and Black communities. I have also had the opportunity to speak on the Hill and write about the most pressing tech issues important to communities of color. Moreover, I have been invited to spaces I could have never dreamed of and developed relationships that only the Aspen Institute could have provided.

As a Black woman, second-generation, with a Ph.D., it was only in D.C. and at the Aspen Institute, that I was able to thrive in a field where there are very few people like me.

Dallas Harris, Nevada State Senator

When I decided I wanted to go to law school, I, like most first-year law students, had no idea what I wanted to use my law degree for, or whether I was going to use it at all.

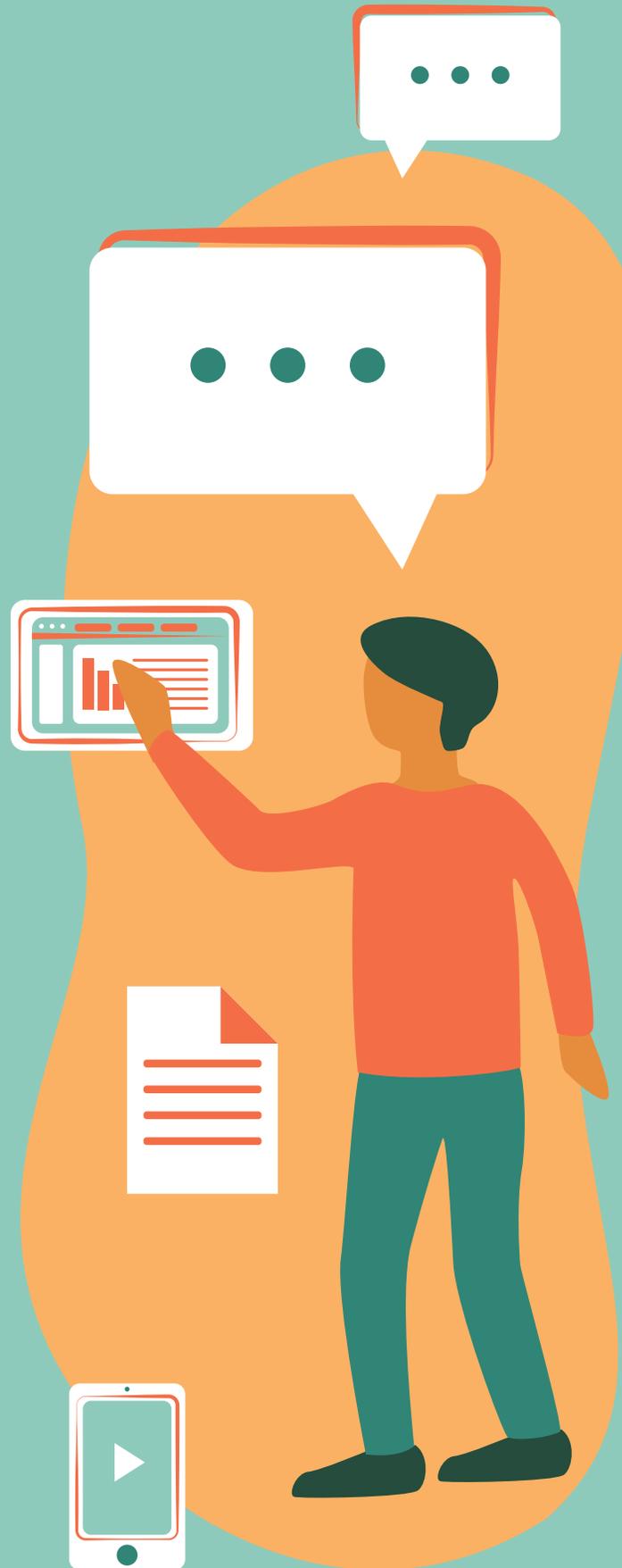
In my first year, on recommendation from my Constitutional Law professor, I interned for Public Citizen, a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that champions the public interest. This was my first brush with public interest law, consumer protection, government, and advocacy (issues that are central to my career to this day). This internship led to another, working for D.C. City Councilwoman Mary Cheh, where I learned about the importance of local government and stakeholder engagement.

Now having some experience with the federal government and consumer protection, my second summer of law school, I was selected as an intern at the Federal Trade Commission. There I learned about regulation, federal agencies, antitrust, legal memo writing, and the interplay between the executive and legislative branches of government.

At this point, I wanted to ensure that I had some experience in the private sector, so I asked a partner at a small law firm for an internship. I also accepted an externship at the D.C. office of Facebook. Each of these experiences expanded my network, skill set, and education.

Ultimately, these early-career roles led me to my first post-law school fellowship at Public Knowledge. A mentor at Public Knowledge encouraged me to pursue a job in utility regulation working for a Commissioner at the Public Utilities Commission in my home state. That Commissioner became a great mentor who took the time to expand my network in Nevada. This eventually led to my state Senate appointment in 2018.

I believe the moral of the story is that luck is opportunity meeting preparation. Early-career positions like internships and fellowships prepare you for the opportunities that will present themselves. Knock on every door, and be sure to take some skills from every opportunity with you to the next. Then be sure to reach back down the ladder and bring someone with you on the way up.



Endnotes

1. In a separate question, we also asked respondents if they would like to share other groups of which they seek to increase representation. Some responded that they also seek to increase participation of economically, geographically, and politically diverse candidates; women, people with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals; and candidates with international experience and second language skills.
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