

CASE STUDY: EPICENTER

Recruiting & Retaining Young Professionals



EPICENTER

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ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW

Epicenter is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Green River, Utah (population 952). Epicenter's activities focus on affordable housing advocacy and development, community and economic development, and the promotion of the arts within the community of Green River. Epicenter was founded in 2009 by three classmates and recent graduates from Auburn University's School of Architecture: Jack Forinash, Rand Pinson, and Maria Sykes. From January 2009 to October 2015, Epicenter used 149 young professionals to carry out its activities.

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REPORT NOTES

Sources of Staff & Volunteers Hosted by Epicenter

Source	Years hosted	Full- or part-time (FT/PT)	Number hosted to-date
AmeriCorps VISTA ¹	2009-present	FT	11
AmeriCorps NCCC ²	2009-2011	FT	55
AmeriCorps State ³	2013-2014	PT	2
Frontier Fellows ⁴	2011-present	FT	58
Interns ⁵	2009-present	FT	14
Other Volunteers ⁶	2009-present	PT	9
Total			149

Limitation of the Report

This report is intended to provide information on Epicenter's history of recruiting and retaining young talent and serve as a case study of those efforts. It should be understood that the same methods, benefits, and activities used in recruiting and retaining employees may not have the same effectiveness for other organizations. Place and circumstance have and continue to play an active role in Epicenter's employment efforts as they do at any organization.

The reader should understand this report (and the information therein) represents efforts of recruiting and retaining Epicenter's current and past employees. Of current Epicenter staff members, none are married or have children. Should staff members enter a committed long-term relationship and/or have children, their priorities regarding the incentives they seek out could or would likely change. Epicenter has not purposefully only employed unwed and independent staff; it is presumed, however, that the organization's self-representation online and through job postings, along with the benefits offered, has tended to attract such applicants. Additionally, data shows that millennials are marrying and having children later in life than the previous generation; the age of the most recent applicants has been below that of the current average age of marriage and childbirth. Lastly, the size of Green River and the disproportionately low amount of young adults age 18-34 (as compared to the state and national averages) affects the ability and tendency of staff members who have worked in Green River for multiple years in finding and retaining romantic relationships that would lead to marriage.

This report focuses on an organization in a small, rural town: Green River, Utah. Typical to rural America, Green River has a low cost of living. Gross wages presented in this report reflect these low costs and would need to be adjusted to the specific place and cost of living.

Epicenter began just as the Great Recession (December 2007 through June 2009) picked up steam. The economy at that time severely impacted fresh-out-of-school professionals and certainly had a role in Epicenter's ability to attract the founding team and new employees. As the economy has recovered, Epicenter has experienced a tougher time in recruiting long-term staff, but has had no trouble recruiting short-term staff members. As an established organization with an ever-widening network of supporters and past staff members, it may be easier for Epicenter to recruit staff members than another less established organization or program.

¹AmeriCorps VISTA members serve twelve-month, full-time capacity building terms with organizations they select. VISTAs receive a modest living stipend, health insurance benefit, a relocation allowance, and a cash or education award at successful completion of service. Epicenter has partnered with PACT, a Green River non-profit, and United Way of Eastern Utah to host VISTA members. More info on all AmeriCorps positions at americorps.gov.

²AmeriCorps NCCC members serve ten-month, full-time terms with organizations that apply to host them for four to eight weeks at a time. Epicenter partnered with PACT to host five NCCC teams that worked primarily on the renovation of the Epicenter building and the construction of the Habitat for Humanity house.

³AmeriCorps State members commit to an amount of hours that can be performed over twelve months. They receive a modest stipend, health insurance, and a cash or education award at successful completion of service. Epicenter hosted AmeriCorps State members on behalf of Habitat for Humanity of Castle

Priorities of Millennials

The Millennial Generation refers to those born between 1980 and 2004. Of the 149 staff and volunteers shown in the prior chart, 95% are of the Millennial Generation. This report is not intended to comment specifically on the priorities of millennials (much better reports on this topic are available from better researched outlets); however, this report must keep in mind and acknowledge the attitudes of this generation, which has constituted nearly all of Epicenter's staff to-date. As a basic primer on "millennials," Epicenter reached out to its network and received this perspective from a CEO of a very successful for-profit firm, who himself is a millennial:

"Millennials only understand base compensation. Unfortunately, the alternative perks (like a 401k, free national park passes, health insurance) don't factor in as they just compare themselves to their peers in terms of base compensation.

"Learning is more important than salary for millennials – training & great mentors to learn from mean a ton to our younger staff. When our [staff members] leave they will often cite lack of experienced leadership, training, & growth opportunities. That and the company they went to paid them \$10k more in base salary.

"We have created a cadence of communication for our millennials that gets them all on the same page as the leadership's vision and creates a culture of inclusion. Millennials love to feel a part of the company strategy & vision."⁷

Country to carry out HFHCC's home repair program.

⁴Frontier Fellows are artists- and designers-in-residence hosted by Epicenter. Fellows come from across the globe with backgrounds in art, design, sculpture, community engagement, architecture, literature, graphic design, and other creative fields. Fellows typically receive funding for the project materials and some receive a travel stipend upon successful completion of service. More info at frontierfellowship.org.

⁵Epicenter regularly hosts interns, typically during the summer months. A living allowance and housing is provided. Typical interns are in between semesters in college or recent graduates.

⁶Other volunteers include young professionals who have worked with Epicenter on project development (typically off-site).

⁷Quotes from questions posed by Epicenter to Alex Membrillo, a 30-year-old CEO of a for-profit marketing company out of Atlanta, GA.

RECRUITMENT

job posting distribution and response

Posters were printed on 11x17 paper and mailed to 32 colleges/universities with:

- architecture programs,
- design programs in close proximity to Green River,
- and to programs with which Epicenter has had prior contact.

Posters were mailed to colleges in the West (59%), South (22%), Midwest (9%), and Northeast (9%). Digital PDFs of the posters in 8-1/2x11" format were e-mailed to Epicenter's full contact list (approximately 160 contacts made up of partners and past staff and volunteers) with a request to pass this opportunity along to students and recent graduates that may be interested and to post it on the college's opportunity listings board/webpage. The job announcement was also posted on Epicenter's social media outlets, including Epicenter's website, Facebook page, Instagram account, and Twitter account.

From this posting, Epicenter received 33 applications for three available summer internship positions. The average applicant age was 23.7 years old. Applications were received from the Northeast (35% of applicants), West (32%), South (13%), Midwest (10%), and foreign countries (10%). Seven of the 33 applicants were short-listed and interviewed. Three were selected and successfully served a term as interns. Two interns applied for AmeriCorps VISTA positions during their internship and were subsequently chosen to fill open VISTA positions.

Sample job posting used to attract summer intern applicants, summer 2015:



Epicenter is seeking summer interns to live, work, and play in Green River, Utah. In this small, rural town in the high desert of the American West, you will work alongside citizen architects, designers, planners, and artists to serve the needs of their community. Here, you'll gain invaluable and one-of-a-kind experience within the realm of public interest design in this alternative model of professional practice. Epicenter capitalizes on its ingrained idealism, enthusiasm, and subversion to nurture community-led projects and programs that underscore Green River's rural pride and pioneering spirit.

Potential Projects:

- Lead University of Utah architecture students on the construction of a shading structure on the front of the office.
- Work as a project assistant on eight Fix It First home repair projects (start to finish including material take offs, labor estimating, design, construction, and post-evaluation).
- Lead one home repair project with volunteers in early August.
- Be trained in grant writing and write for funding for affordable housing programs.
- Collect data and create a report on housing conditions and needs of local residents.
- Host a creative half-day workshop with local kids on a personal or professional interest.
- Assist in the design/construction of museum exhibits and help in the preparation of a multi-participant exhibit running June - October at the John Wesley Powell River History Museum.

Qualifications:

- Design/build experience is very much preferred, but not required. Ability to work safely with tools is required.
- Be enrolled in a design program, including but not limited to architecture, landscape architecture, construction, or community planning.
- Hold a valid driver's license; ability to drive stick is a plus.
- Effective written, verbal, and drawn communication.
- Interest in rural issues, community development, affordable housing, and/or public interest design.

Workload and Compensation:

- 13 weeks in the summer of 2015, with adjustable start dates of May 14 through August 13
- A total of 500 hours, all able to be counted as Intern Development Program (IDP) credit
- Shared housing with other summer interns is provided (\$975 value)
- \$2,250 living stipend
- Up to \$250 travel reimbursement
- Group meals twice per week are included
- Use of a National Park pass
- Work 400 feet from an Amtrak station that connects you on the California Zephyr, which runs from Chicago to San Francisco
- Sunny days at the river beach just north of town
- Free admission to a local rodeo

NON-TRADITIONAL INTERNSHIPS ARE HERE IN THE DESERT OF SOUTHEAST UTAH

Don't be a "house pet to the rich" for the summer! Join us here where you'll work alongside other young professionals, interacting with and directly helping real people in a real place.

To apply, submit a letter of interest no later than April 9, 2015 to info@ruralandproud.org. An application will be provided in return. Interviews will be held via phone.

More information on Epicenter can be found at ruralandproud.org or from the following recent press:

<http://tinyurl.com/p7y6i3n>

<http://tinyurl.com/ou8wg66>

<http://tinyurl.com/kgniymf>

<http://tinyurl.com/vnrmob5s>

<https://vimeo.com/79758708>

STAFF SURVEY RESULTS

incentives desired

Details of the Survey Sample:

Survey date: early October 2015
Number of responses: 8
Average age of responders: 28

Base annual compensation (amount/number of responders receiving amount):
\$9,000⁸ (1), \$11,676 (2), \$11,968 (1), \$15,649 (1), \$26,500 (3)

List of fringe benefits received:

- Vacation/sick days (average 23 annually for salaried employees) -OR- PTO for part-time employees (0.0769 hours earned per hour worked)
- Epicenter-paid homemade dinners (about 3-1/2 meals per month, valued at \$168 annually)
- Epicenter-paid lunches (\$144 annual value)
- Flexible work week
- Per diem allowance of \$40 per day for out-of-town conferences/meetings
- Freedom to take side jobs (VISTAs and PT staff only)
- Mileage reimbursement as incurred at federal rate
- VISTAs only: health ins. benefit (\$2,700 value), relocation allowance (\$550), and education award (\$5,730)

Total average compensation including value of benefits:

- VISTAs: \$20,418 annually (equates to \$9.82/hr)
- Part-time staff: \$18.27 per hour (773 average annual hours)
- Principals: \$26,812 annually (equates to \$12.89/hr)

Question 1: "What would be the top three benefits/incentives you be most excited about receiving at Epicenter?"

This question provided a list of incentives Epicenter may be able to offer.

Incentive (number of responses, out of 8)

- Health insurance coverage or other insurance benefits (i.e. life, vision, dental) partially paid by employer (5)
- 3% raise (3)
- performance bonus options based on work output (such as receiving a bonus for writing a successful grant equal to 3% of the award amount) (2)
- one-week training out of state of your choice and topic (related in some way), travel and per diem covered (2)
- \$500 allocated to you to create/build a personal project (2)
- a more flexible work week or work schedule (2)
- the use of a company vehicle for work-related travel/transportation (2)

Chosen once:

- 3% one-time annual bonus
- 25% discount at any time to a local restaurant I enjoy
- employer matching contributions to a 401(k) retirement plan

Not chosen by any respondent:

- flexible spending account (a portion of the pre-tax paycheck is used for uncovered health expenses, such as ER visits, orthodontics, and eyewear)
- educational assistance where pre-approved continuing education classes are reimbursed upon successful completion
- 10% increase in paid vacation/sick days
- \$150 work supplies/safety equipment allocation for you to spend as you desire
- free tickets to an out-of-town event, such as a concert, movie,

⁸ Intern received \$2,250 base compensation for three months; \$9k represented prorated annual salary, which isn't what would actually happen.

STAFF SURVEY RESULTS

retaining existing employees

Question 2: "What needs to happen for you to still be working here in 12 months?"

This question was posed with an open answer format.

Response (number of responses of same intent)

- "I need to feel that what I am doing is relevant and significant to Epicenter and to Green River." (2)
- "I need to feel that staying here will be beneficial to my overall career path." (2)
- "The ability to freely do more hands-on work (less computer)." (2)
- "I need to feel more that my opinion matters."
- "Resolve my home living conditions so it doesn't carry over to being stressed at work."
- "Respect among co-workers."
- "Effective evaluation of staff and supervisors."
- "Vacation allowances that allow for opportunities to visit my family, get a change of scene with relative frequency. Green River is both appealing and intimidating as home base for extended periods, especially for a city slicker like myself."
- "See progression with current projects, successful completion, and beginning new projects."
- "Personal growth (or attachment) within the community."
- "Work or hobbies that are explicitly creative in nature."

Question 3: "What would need to happen for you to be here in 3-5 years?"

This question was posed with an open answer format.

Organization Thriving And Community Stays Engaged

- "Epicenter is constantly doing new construction."
- "Continued expansion of Epicenter's programs (Fix It First [home repair program] is bigger, new housing programs, building more)."
- "Stay happy and fascinated with the work I am doing, the people I engage with daily, and overall community involvement."

Having An Escape

- "A full program that allows (and encourages!) exploration and research beyond Epicenter, outside of Green River, so that I can see other places and be valued there for my experience here, while simultaneously learning from the other organizations and/or getting a different experience."
- "I get time to travel (domestically if not internationally)."

Personal Relationships

- "A significant other lives here or close enough (SLC works)." (two responses to this effect)
- "Strengthen personal support circle."

Wages (the most common with 5 out of 8 referencing wages/benefits. Notable that wages were not a part of the "12 month needs.")

- "Wages become comparable to at least a first year intern architect."
- "I also need to be paid what I am worth (based on similar positions in urban and rural places)."
- "I would need to receive more wages than given by AmeriCorps VISTA."
- "Pay raise or benefits."
- "Health insurance, or a subsidy."

Question 4: "Rate the most important factors/opportunities in keeping you with Epicenter and in Green River."

This prompt provided options. What follows is the 5 top-rated factors out of 11 provided, from highest rated to lowest.

1. Work at a young, growing, and enterprising organization that follows a unique model for community engagement and empowerment.
2. Experience the vast desert landscape though any number of ways (i.e. hiking at Black Dragon Canyon, hanging out at Three Rocks to watch the sunset, late night walk to the GR State Park pier).
3. See my projects go from just ideas to real projects that exist in the world; projects that help inform or shape the community I live in.
4. Make real contributions to the economic and social fabric of a rural community.
5. Use my background, interests, and skills in ways that are meaningful to me.

RECOMMENDATIONS

to other organizations

What follows are recommendations Epicenter would make to other non-profit organizations seeking to recruit and retain millennials. These recommendations should be read as suggestions that may help in employment efforts at not-for-profit organizations. However, these recommendations are based solely on the experience of Epicenter in Green River, Utah, and may be more or less successful in other places with other organizations and in other economies.

Young professionals today are more likely to volunteer their time and expertise when it is a case of doing “work that matters,” something we hear often. Climbing a corporate ladder towards more control and money is not as important for recruits just out of college. Certainly, the Great Recession had a role in re-orienting recent graduates that have left college with large amounts of student debt and are not able to find the jobs they expected to have available to them.

What follows are recommendations you may choose to use:

1. Wages remain the number one attractant for full-time positions. **Weave competitive wages with a job description based in providing varied experiences:** the ability to work in multiple programs, shadow other positions in the organization, gain new skills such as grant writing (a common skill requested we teach), and connect to the direct impact of the organization.
2. In job postings, **be sure to represent the uniqueness and recreation/cultural opportunities of your community and region.** For example, in our experience, those from the East and West Coasts are entranced by the Wild West, where Epicenter is located. Lead them on.
3. In job postings, highlight your organization’s respect for humanity and our society’s (too-often-forgotten) role to protect the disadvantaged and serve the underserved. **Speak to the heart first**, then to the head with critical details about wages and benefits.
4. Send job postings to colleges and universities that have programs that are matches to your programs. More than that, **send postings to a specific contact at the school with a personal note**, which will take research and contact prior to mailing posters. This will ensure it gets put up on the job board and comes to mind to professors and advisors when students ask for suggestions of summer internships and alternative careers.
5. **Maintain an active presence online.** A high quality, well-designed website that is up-to-date with current projects and exhibits an active organization is critical towards being “found” on the internet and engaging this generation that is always connected. Make it the role of a young professional to keep your Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts active and of a quality of posts that shows the organization is robust and up with the times.
6. **Provide a menu of fringe benefits where employees can pick the ones that best serve them.** Internally, attribute values to the benefits so you can be sure employees are getting equal benefits among similar positions with similar tenure. Educate the employees on the full value of their position with wages and benefits combined.
7. **Offer benefits that have shorter-term results and capitalize on the desire to be the best**, such as performance bonuses. A more flexible work week and more vacation days are preferable to higher wages. Set work output and performance expectations and reward those that work efficiently with time off. This generation has an itch to go see the country and gain new experiences, to be able to visit friends and family while they are not tied down by a mortgage and family.
8. **Offer sabbaticals or longer duration training opportunities that allow employees to escape the stresses of a non-profit world.** Make this benefit a condition of employment, such as being eligible after twelve months of service. Have employees feel they are earning that extended vacation or training opportunity and they’ll come back after to earn it again, along with a reinvigorated attitude and bringing back lessons learned about best practices from that partner organization. Require that they present to the rest of the organization on the things they’ve learned and places they’ve seen. This will allow the employees to feel they are teaching others and will remind other employees of what lies ahead with continued hard work and commitment. An exchange program is possible with partner organizations and as your staff proves to be valuable to their program, they might even start chipping in on the costs and/or provide such things as housing or travel stipends.
9. **Hire more than one millennial.** Bringing in peers that can become a micro-community within the office will keep employees around. This recommendation is especially important in rural organizations where traditional peers within the community are less abundant.
10. **Offer opportunities to serve in critical roles on projects or within the organization.** During employment contract extensions, ask such questions as, “What are you doing that is not within your job description?” and, “What would you like to be working on that is not currently in your job description?”

To accentuate Green River's rural pride and pioneering spirit, Epicenter provides housing and business resources and promotes the arts.

EPICENTER