

2022

## Improving Racial Diversity in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team (ERT)

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Michael McLemore

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Improving Racial Diversity in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team  
(ERT)

by

Michael E. McLemore II

MPP, New England College, 2015

MBA, American Intercontinental University, 2012

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

May 2022

## Abstract

There is currently a significant lack of racial diversity in the fields of environmental conservation and emergency management. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify sustainable recommendations to address the lack of racial diversity amongst members of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team (ERT). Trend analysis of the racial makeup of past ERT memberships identified a far less diverse ERT in its earlier cohorts, while illustrating improved racial diversity over the past 10 years. As a result of interviews with ERT administrators, alumni, team leaders, and current members recommendations were identified that aim to sustainably increase African American recruitment, increase African American applicant rates, increase African American membership, improve upon the African American experience, and increase visibility and presence in more diversely populated communities. This study succeeded in identifying and recommending solutions for ERT to use as a means for sustainably increasing racial diversity amongst its members, beginning as early as its next applicant cycle. The positive social change significance of this study is far-reaching in the fields of environmental conservation and emergency management in that it may be repeatedly replicated by service groups similar to ERT as a means for addressing their own racial diversity challenges. Further studies may be necessary in identifying the root cause of why there is such a vast racial disparity in environmental conservation and emergency management.

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## Dedication

My life's motto has always been "Dei Gratia," Latin for by the grace of God, and by the grace of God I was able to complete this study, without whom, none of this would have been possible. I also want to dedicate this study to all of my family and friends that kept me motivated and listened to all of my ideas for what to include in the study late into the night. Finally, I want to dedicate this study to the two major experiences that have shaped my life in service: the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team and Peace Corps Albania.

"See the need, meet the need"

-AmeriCorps St. Louis ERT

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank my mother for pushing me back into school at a time when I thought my academic journey was over. Without her constant insistence that I finish school with a doctoral degree, I may never have returned to school.

I want to thank those that took the time out of their day to participate in the interviews necessary for the completion of this study. Many were alumni of the AmeriCorps St. Louis Emergency Response Team (ERT) and their participation in such an important, albeit controversial study, is indicative of their continued desire to see the program continue to grow and progress by promoting social change through diversity and inclusion.

I want to thank the AmeriCorps St. Louis Emergency Response Team for agreeing to be the subject of this professional administrative study and providing me with the resources for data collection. The timing of this study and ERT's desire to focus on increasing racial diversity couldn't have been more perfect, and I thank them for trusting me with the task of identifying recommendations for increasing its diversity.

Finally, I'd like to thank my committee, Dr. Julian Muhammad and Dr. Ross Alexander, both of whom made my completing this professional administrative study on time a reality. Their feedback was not only key in the completion of this study, but also integral in my growth as both writer and researcher. The completion of this study would not have been possible without their input, and for that I am eternally grateful for their participation and contributions. BEST COMMITTEE EVER!

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

### **Introduction**

The AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team (ERT) is an AmeriCorps State and National initiative with a focus on environmental conservation, wild land firefighting, emergency management, homeless outreach, community advocacy, and disaster preparedness training. According to the Saint Louis ERT, its mission is

to enhance the professional skills and life-long ethic of the young men and women who serve; to respond to critical unmet needs in the areas of emergency response and environmental conservation; to leverage service of volunteers; and to build the capacity of our partnering agencies and communities we serve.

(AmeriCorps St. Louis, 2021)

Every year hundreds of applicants from all over the United States apply for admission to the next cohort of ERT volunteers. Those applicants come from a number of different backgrounds, experience levels, ages, and educational levels. Most have studied biology, environmental science, anthropology, or geography. There are also rare cases in which members come straight from high school and join ERT as part of a gap year before beginning university. However, as diverse as the backgrounds for cohorts may be, the racial makeup of each cohort appears to be the same.

On average, ERT cohorts are usually around 30 total volunteers and are mostly made up of Caucasian Americans. There are typically only two or three African-American volunteers in each cohort. The current cohort of ERT volunteers has only 2

African American women in the group and no African American men. This disparity presents an organizational challenge within ERT, as a lack of racial diversity results in a lack of diverse skills, experiences, and backgrounds from those of different races. By identifying solutions to the racial disparity challenges of ERT membership, positive social change is achieved through the addition and sustainability of an increase of African American applicants and ERT members.

### **Problem Statement**

The organizational challenges facing the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT are the lack of diversity amongst its members, particularly sufficient African American representation. On average, ERT cohorts are made up of predominately young Caucasian volunteers with only between one to three African Americans. The current cohort includes two African American women, but no African American men.

Consequently, the main problem is the underrepresentation of African Americans in AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT, which reflects the same systemic disparities found in the American volunteer sector. Recent studies indicate that there has been little progress in improving racial and gender diversity in the nonprofit and volunteer sector during the past decade (Sandberg et al., 2019). For the African Americans, the implications are far-reaching because such disparities limit their access to training and career opportunities needed to prepare them to participate in emergency response operations in St. Louis, Missouri. For example, the population of St. Louis, Missouri is comprised of 46.4% African American residents as of July 1, 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). As such, ERT

should reflect as close to this racial percentage as possible to reduce the disparities in its cohorts.

A significant obstacle facing the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT in its efforts of diversifying its membership is the recent travel advisory for African Americans traveling through the state of Missouri. In 2017, for the first time in its history, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued a statewide travel advisory for people of color traveling or living within the state of Missouri in response to Senate Bill 43, which according to Coleman (2017), “makes it more difficult for employees to prove their protected class, like race or gender, directly led to unlawful discrimination.” The NAACP interpreted the signing of the bill as similar to past Jim Crow laws. According to the Springfield, Missouri chapter of the NAACP, “Senate Bill 43 legalizes individual discrimination and harassment in Missouri and prevents individuals from protecting themselves from discrimination, harassment, and retaliation in Missouri courts” (NAACP Springfield, 2021). This is significant, as the majority of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT’s projects are carried out in rural Missouri communities, where there is little to no racial diversity and a long history of racism. This potentially keeps minorities, specifically African Americans, from applying to serve in communities where the perception is that they are not welcome.

On race, the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), Barbara Stewart, has stated,

our work builds bridges, breaks down barriers, and brings communities together in ways that challenge perspectives and increase understanding.

Racism, discrimination, and hate run counter to our core values.

(Corporation for National and Community Service, 2020)

Some have identified potential solutions to improve upon the underrepresentation of African Americans in the AmeriCorps. On the issue of diversifying the AmeriCorps from a national perspective, Vadehra and Edelman (2020) state, to improve diversity within AmeriCorps and ensure individuals from communities served are better represented, Congress should increase the living allowance to better cover member expenses. Just as with unpaid internships, low pay can lock out would-be participants from lower-income backgrounds who are also disproportionately people of color. Given the high return on investment of every dollar invested in AmeriCorps, living allowances could be raised significantly while still maintaining a positive return for taxpayers and communities.

Vadehra and Edelman go on to state,

a new diversity, equity, and inclusion officer and team at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) headquarters could also work with current grantees to identify and disseminate best practices around recruiting and supporting diverse corps members and building inclusive organizations at the local level.

This project may very well serve as a template for attracting a more diverse cohort in American volunteer groups all over the United States that are typically made up of a majority of Caucasian members. The new strategies identified through this



study will attract a more diverse applicant pool in a number of different industries that African Americans are usually not interested in or are inhibited by systemic racism or discriminatory practices. Increased interest will result in an increase in increased minority applicants and admittance into service groups similar to that of ERT.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to identify factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African American participants in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT and to craft recommendations to the organization to increase their candidacy and membership with future ERT cohorts. There is a need to identify solutions to increase African American membership within ERT, which has been a core initiative of ERT for decades. However, for many reasons known and unknown, the ERT has not made significant progress in this core initiative.

It is important to note that the majority of ERT projects take place in rural Missouri, which has always a bad reputation for race relations for African American people. In fact, Missouri is the only state to ever receive a travel advisory from the NAACP for African American people traveling through the state. It is important that the fears of racial injustices are minimized as part of recruitment efforts so that any potential African American applicants may feel more safe and secure to serve communities in rural Missouri.

As such, there is clearly a gap in ERT's organization knowledge to effectively resolve its racial disparity challenges, which this project is intended help address. This

study identified recommendations to increase African American candidacy and membership within future ERT cohorts.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors contribute to underrepresentation of African Americans in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT?
2. What specific efforts can be taken to increase and sustain increased representation of African Americans in future cohorts of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT?

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of the study encompassed both historical and phenomenological research designs to address the research questions. For example, the aim of historical research design is to collect, verify, and synthesize evidence from the past to establish facts surrounding a specific problem or phenomenon, relaying primary and secondary data sources. Phenomenological research, on the other hand, relies predominantly on primary data, collected from participant interviews (Grossoehme, 2014). This included interviews with AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT administrators, team members, and alumni to gain insight regarding the challenges associated with underrepresentation of African American candidacies in ERT. Their experiences and opinions identified factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African Americans as well as glean possible solutions to attract more African Americans to ERT and sustain those efforts. This study included conducting almost 10 voluntary interviews with ERT administration, team members, and alumni to gain insight on their respective perspectives on the challenges

associated with achieving and sustaining a more diverse cohort. Interview questions included the following:

1. What actions can be taken by ERT during the recruitment process to attract a more diverse applicant pool?
2. What methods could ERT employ to make a service year more attractive for African American applicants?
3. What concerns about ERT may turn off potential African American applicants and what can ERT do to address those concerns?

In addition to this, past applications and cohorts were examined for specific variables contributing to racial disparity in ERT. This process also gleans future cohorts and is comprised based upon the current application cycle. This approach is also what makes the study historical research. For example, trend analysis (line graphs displaying demographic trends) provides further evidence into identified contributing factors and any potential trends that display any changes over time (Wang, 2021). Because the ERT is now entering its 28th year, there should be considerable information and data from the past 28 cohorts to extrapolate evidence and historical significance to the issue and its potential solutions.

Document review is another key component of data collection, as it informs greater understanding of the past present and potential future challenges associated with under-representation of African Americans in AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT. Kayesa and Shung-King (2021) defined documents as “a range of written material sources available, in relation to a particular topic” (p. 2). Public organization documents include “media

reports, research reports, personal letters, emails, diaries and policy documents (Policy reports, national guidelines and strategies, meeting proceedings, implementation guidelines and training manuals) among others...” (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021, p. 2).

For example, documents used for review and data collection for this study included, but were not limited to:

1. Past applications for ERT admittance for demographics information
2. Past ERT rosters for historical significance of issues with diversity
3. Current organizational efforts for increasing diversity amongst ERT membership
4. Past membership evaluations for identification of areas where minorities may have struggled during their service with ERT and how those past minority members evaluated service with ERT for identification of areas where ERT can improve the experience of minorities during their service.

The documents were obtained from the ERT and publicly available sources as identified. The ERT agreed to allow access to required documents. I anticipated that the findings from the analysis of these documents would identify trends in African American membership and identify how the service year may be made more attractive to potential African American applicants. The evaluations from past members also assisted in identifying themes in how African American members felt about their service with ERT and solutions may be built off that information as a means for increasing the overall experience for those serving with ERT as well.

### **Significance of Study**

This study was significant because it is anticipated that the recommendations will improve African American representation in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT, which will also contribute to social change in the areas of racial diversity in future cohorts of ERT members. Therefore, the stakeholders potentially impacted by this study not only include AmeriCorps and African Americans but public and nonprofit organizations that need to improve racial diversity their organizations. Recent studies have shown that increased diversity has been proven to increase productivity, provide a wider range of skills, improve creativity, improve cultural insights, and provide new perspectives and solutions to organizational and operational issues (Clarke, 2021). For some time now, ERT has struggled with recruitment of people of color in its past cohorts, and as the world has become more socially aware and diverse, ERT also needs to become more inclusive and diverse.

In the field of public organization administration, the study contributes to wider efforts to address the systemic racial disparities that exist in public, volunteer and nonprofit organizations. Hill and Curry-Stevens (2017) found the changing environment at the local and national levels has increased the need for “nonprofit leadership and organizations to address issues of racial and ethnic disparities with more equitable systems and practice” (p. 24). This is the aim of my study because it has the potential to provide recommendations to not only improve the representation of African Americans in AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT but change its organizational culture. This will have

positive impact on social change in America's service corps and throughout the United States.

### **Summary**

As stated in this section, the purpose of this study was to increase racial diversity in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT. This study examined trends in racial diversity in past cohorts of ERT membership and mapped the current trajectory of diversity trends amongst future cohort memberships to identify factors contributing to insufficient representations of American Americans in ERT. Document analysis and interviews with current and former ERT members contributed to the development of recommendations for improving racial diversity. This study also contributed to wider efforts to address the systemic racial disparities that exist in public, volunteer, and nonprofit organizations.

In the next section of this study, an analysis of the concepts and documents necessary to identify solutions for the diversity challenges that have faced ERT for a number of years is presented.

## Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

### **Introduction**

In this section, I discuss the conceptual framework for which this study is based, as well as describe the relevance of this project to public organizations, provide additional organizational history of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT, and explain my role and motivations for the study. As stated in the previous section, the main problem addressed by this study is the underrepresentation of African Americans in AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT, which reflects the same systemic disparities found in the American volunteer sector. As such, the purpose of the study is to identify factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African American participants in the ERT and to craft recommendations to the organization to increase their candidacy and membership with future ERT cohorts. The research questions are:

1. What factors contribute to underrepresentation of African Americans in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT?
2. What specific efforts can be taken to increase and sustain increased representation of African Americans in future cohorts of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that supports this study was inclusive excellence. Inclusive excellence, as defined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2021), is “active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity in ways that increase our personal and social awareness, content knowledge, cognitive

sophistication and empathetic understanding of one another.” Today, universities across the United States are implementing plans for inclusive excellence as a means for diversification of their cohorts. For example, the University of Missouri employs an inclusive excellence plan based upon pillars including access and success, institutional climate and intergroup relations, education and scholarship, institutional infrastructure, and community engagement.

The framework of inclusive excellence is one that fits in perfectly with the goals set out in this project for ERT. As stated above, inclusive excellence is being proactive in engaging in diversification as a means to evolve the organizational culture of ERT. The framework has been use in similar studies. For example, Schmidt and MacWilliams (2015) applied the inclusive excellence framework to nursing education to promote inclusion and diversity, while Haynes and Tuitt (2020) explored university faculty perceptions of racial climate and the impact those perceptions on effort to advance inclusive excellence in academic settings. The authors found that faculty pursuing extensive engagement with inclusive excellence experienced hostility toward their efforts to improve diversity and inclusion on campus.

The logical connections between the framework presented and my study are the goals of identifying challenges that inhibit diversity and inclusion in the ERT as well as solutions to improve representation of African American membership. The pillars of inclusive excellence, as described by the University of Missouri and other colleges in the United States, are applicable for America’s service corps. This study will identify



recommendations to increase diversity in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT using the inclusive excellence framework.

For example, institutional climate and intergroup relations are applicable to this study, as it is important for groups like ERT to be supportive of minorities once admitted to the group. Education and scholarship are applicable, as it is also important for ERT to create curricula that promotes inclusion within the group, particularly while out on projects. Institutional infrastructure is applicable to this study, as it is important that people of color within the group have opportunity for advancement and positions of power within the group (University of Missouri, 2018). In the case of ERT, ensuring that there is an adequate amount of team leaders of color while out on project is vitally important, especially for other members of color to see diverse leadership. Community engagement is applicable for the purpose of recruitment and being visible in communities with minority populations.

### **Relevance to Public Organizations**

As the world is becoming more socially aware of situations where inequalities exist, it is important that diversity and inclusion are embraced in all American sectors and that efforts are implemented to increase and sustain diversity. The AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT has served as a model for service, conservation, and disaster response through its work all over the United States. The AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT led relief efforts in natural and manmade disasters including Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina and the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. It aims to continue to lead by providing the model for increasing racial diversity amongst its ranks. Similar

programs to ERT have had their issues with attracting a more diverse membership, with the majority of African American men instead choosing to serve in the American Armed Forces rather than in the AmeriCorps. Conversely, African American women are actually over-represented in the AmeriCorps. According to Reeves and Nzau (2020),

compared to the civilian labor force, Black men are significantly over-represented in military service, while Black women are similarly over-represented in civilian service. Among whites, women are significantly under-represented in military service, while men are significantly under-represented in civilian service.

One could look at the socioeconomic background of those who typically volunteer for organizations similar to that of ERT. According to a study completed by Tang (2008),

results indicate that more highly educated, older adults are more likely than their less-educated counterparts to volunteer in all five types of organizations (i.e., religious, educational, political, senior citizen, and others), volunteer in a wider range of organizations, and devote more hours. However, income makes little significant difference in organizational volunteering.

This study completed by Tang is very much significant to other public organizations, including ERT and this study, because it illustrates that the majority of potential volunteers are those that are older and have an advanced educational background and that income makes little difference on the impact of

volunteerism. This makes the ideal candidates for service groups, like ERT, to be someone who either recently graduated from university, in between careers, or recently retired. These are typically the demographics of applicants that currently apply for service for ERT, so now the focus shifts on how to make these applicant pools more racially diverse.

Increased diversity in all industries, not only the AmeriCorps, have had proven benefits to the organizational cultures and operational capabilities of corporations all over the world. According to Clarke (2021), a more diverse workplace results in increased productivity, improved creativity, increased profits, improved employee engagement, reduced employee turnover, improved company reputation, a wider range of skills, and improved cultural insights. For these reasons, it would be beneficial for any corporation or service group to consider initiatives to increase diversity amongst its ranks.

Although diversity is inherent in AmeriCorps mission, the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT has not been successful in its efforts to ensure sufficient racial diversity in its membership. In fact, it is unclear what efforts have been taken to improve racial diversity. As previously stated, this study reflects similar efforts to address racial diversity challenges using inclusive excellence theory, specifically those of Schmidt and MacWilliams (2015) and Haynes and Tuitt (2020). The study also identified efforts and challenges, as well as opportunities to improve racial diversity in the ERT.

Diversification is the only one term use in the study that requires clarification because of multiple meanings. In this study diversification means “the process of creating variance amongst a group of people” and not “the process of a business enlarging or

varying its range of products and/or services” (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2021).

### **Organizational Background and Context**

Beginning in 1994, following the establishment of the AmeriCorps by President Bill Clinton, ERT has been active in response efforts for many of America’s most notable natural and manmade disasters including the Oklahoma City bombing, the 9/11 attacks in New York, Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, the Joplin Tornado in Missouri, Hurricane Sandy in New York, and Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Puerto Rico (AmeriCorps St. Louis, 2021). In addition to this, ERT has defended against wildfires throughout Missouri, Idaho, Montana, and Oregon. Every winter, ERT opens its office space to the homeless and serves as a shelter every night that the temperature falls below freezing (AmeriCorps St. Louis, 2021). This shelter provides dozens with three meals a day, toiletries, warm blankets and beds, and entertainment with television, board games, and card games.

The majority of ERT activity between emergency response deployments is in environmental conservation projects throughout the states of Missouri, Illinois, and Montana. Those conservation projects include glade restoration, invasive plant life removal, trail building and maintenance, fire line building and maintenance, dead tree removal, and habitat protections for local wildlife (AmeriCorps St. Louis, 2021).

The racial discrepancy issue within the AmeriCorps St. Louis ERT became more apparent once AmeriCorps St. Louis ended its educational branch, in which volunteers would teach in St. Louis’ inner city schools. As the program began to focus more on

disaster relief and environmental conservation efforts in rural Missouri, the racial gap amongst volunteers widened until it became the significant issue that this study is looking to provide a solution. Since the educational branch ceased operations, ERT has been tasked with the challenge of making conservation work in rural Missouri more appealing to people of color, especially when it has become widely known that Missouri, outside of its larger metropolitan areas, has a troubled history with people of color. This study will assist ERT in providing reassurance that those fears of life in Missouri as a member of ERT have been exaggerated and that the experience of each volunteer in ERT is shaped by each volunteer individually with the support of ERT leadership. Nonetheless, there remain outside deterrents that may keep African Americans from outside of Missouri from wanting to serve in the state.

There are also potential deterrents that may prevent African Americans from outside of St. Louis from applying for service with ERT. First, St. Louis City has been notorious for decades about its extremely high crime rates. According to Fieldstadt (2020), “St. Louis is America’s 2nd most dangerous city with a crime rate of 1,927 per 100,000 people. In 2019 alone, there were 194 people murdered in a city of just over 200,000 residents” (p. 5).

The other potential deterrent is the travel advisory issued by the NAACP for people of color traveling through the state of Missouri. This is due in part to recent civil unrest and a long history of racially motivated incidents throughout the state. This evidence supports the study’s practice-focused questions, which are, “What factors contribute to insufficient racial diversity within the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency

Response Team?” and “What specific efforts can be taken to increase racial diversity amongst future cohorts of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team?”

### **Definitions**

- Archival data: data previously collected before the beginning of the study
- Diversification: the process of creating variance amongst a group of people
- Emergency response: organizing and responding to natural or manmade disasters or incidents
- Environmental conservation: “the protection, preservation, management, or restoration of natural environments and the ecological communities that inhabit them” (Journal of Geography and Natural Disasters, 2021)
- Homeless outreach: proving food, shelter, and entertainment to the homeless during time of extreme weather
- Inclusive excellence: “active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity in ways that increase our personal and social awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication and empathetic understanding of one another” (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021)
- Recruitment: “actively seeking out, finding and hiring candidates for a specific position or job” (Sage Advice, 2021)
- Thematic analysis: identifying and analyzing patterns in research
- Trend analysis: analyzing past and current trends to predict future trends

- Wildland firefighting: managing wildfires (manmade and natural) to prevent loss of life or property

As a federal agency, AmeriCorps must comply with local, state, and federal laws that prohibit discrimination based on an individual's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and nationality. Therefore, this study identified intentional and non-intentional discriminatory practices. I then made appropriate recommendations to help bring the ERT into compliance.

### **Role of the DPA Student/Researcher**

I am an alumnus of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT having served from September 2013 until August 2014. During that time, I participated in conservation projects throughout the states of Missouri, Illinois, and Montana. In addition to this, I volunteered in the ERT warming shelter for the homeless during the winter months. In this role, I prepared meals, provided janitorial and housekeeping services, coordinated entertainment activities, and conducted resident intake. I also deployed to Washington, Illinois over the Thanksgiving 2013 holiday in response to a devastating tornado that resulted in many miles of damage. In this role, I coordinated volunteers, provided safety briefings and tutorials, participated in debris organization and removal, and coordinated with other on-site volunteer groups to ensure a safe and organized relief effort. Finally, I participated on a fire rotation in Southern Missouri during the height of prescribed burning and wildfire season in Missouri. During this time, I was active in the burning of over 1,000 acres in half a dozen state and national parks.

I acknowledge the pivotal role that serving with the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT has had on my life since my service year. It provided me with an opportunity to not only serve the country and my community in a capacity outside of the Armed Forces, but also gave me the opportunity to step far outside of my own comfort zone and take on a challenge that very few from my community would ever even attempt. I learned skills and lessons during this time that I still carry with me to this very day, the most prominent being the ERT motto of “see the need, meet the need”.

My experience with ERT lead to my eventual service with the Peace Corps in Albania from 2016 until 2018 and I carried many of the lessons learned through ERT service with me into that experience and had a much more successful experience as a result. Though I have had past personal experiences with ERT, I hold no personal bias for how this study will be conducted. The trends, themes and ideologies formed as a result of this study are cultivated by the responses of the AmeriCorps St. Louis Emergency Response Team, its administrators, team leaders, team members, and alumni. Responses and/or opinions stated on diversify ERT’s ranks are not my own.

### **Summary**

In this section, I explained that the concept that best fits this type of study is inclusive excellence, which is defined as “active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity in ways that increase our personal and social awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication and empathetic understanding of one another” (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021). In addition to this, I discussed the relevance of this project to other public organizations, the history of the



AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT, and my role in the study and personal motivations. In the next section, I will discuss the plan for data acquisition to complete this study.

### Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

#### **Introduction**

In this section, I describe my plan for data collection during this study, the sources of data necessary for the study, and any potential limitations to the data collection process and analysis. As stated in earlier sections, the purpose of this project is to identify factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African Americans in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT and to provide recommendations for increasing their representation in ERT. This has been a challenge for the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT for some time now. Trend analysis of past cohorts will be conducted to identify barriers and opportunities for improvement, coupled with participant interviews (current and former members) and document review to develop recommendations for increasing diversity in the ERT.

The following sections are an examination of practice focused questions we are looking to answer through this study, the primary sources of evidence to back up any findings that may produce solutions, plans for acquiring data for this study, the documents necessary for review, and analysis and synthesis of the data identified that will produce trends, themes, and solutions for ERT's diversification challenges.

#### **Practice Focused Questions**

The biggest challenge currently facing the AmeriCorps St. Louis ERT is its lack of diversity amongst its members. As a result, each of their cohorts since 1994 has been predominately made up of Caucasian American volunteers. Each year, ERT employs anywhere between two and four African American members to serve on its emergency response team, typically made up of 35 members. Today, perhaps more than ever, ERT is

looking to diversify its ranks, from administrators to team members, in an effort to promote social and racial progress in today's more socially aware climate. The findings of this study will assist ERT in reaching its goal of a more diverse emergency response team and promote positive social change within the American volunteerism community.

This professional administrative study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What factors contribute to insufficient racial diversity within the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT?
2. What specific efforts can be taken to increase racial diversity amongst future cohorts of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT?

Again, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to identify factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African American participants in the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team and to craft recommendations to the organization to increase their candidacy and membership with future ERT cohorts. This purpose aligns with the data collection approach, which include document analysis and participant interviews. Phenomenological research inquiry is predicated on discovering the meaning of a phenomenon through accounts of lived experiences of study participants. The experiences captured are descriptive and not intellectual interpretations (Thomas, 2021); therefore, coupled with document review, the data collected will help identify ERT's challenges to racial diversity and inform recommendations for improving the representation of African Americans future cohorts. As previously mentioned, diversification has multiple meanings; however, in this study it means "the process of

creating variance amongst a group of people” (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2021).

### **Sources of Evidence**

There are several sources of evidence that will inform this professional administrative study of the client organization, the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT. First, the data included historical cohort demographic information, applicant demographic information, member demographic information, and other key documents to conduct trend analysis and identify factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African Americans in ERT. Second, interviews with current and former ERT members were conducted to identify barriers and opportunities for increasing African American applicants and members.

The evidence obtained from these sources will provide insights to address the practice questions. As previously stated, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to identify factors contributing to the underrepresentation of African American participants in the ERT and improving representation in future cohorts. As such, the collection and analysis of the sources of evidence are central to achieving this purpose of the study by providing the appropriate information to address the research to address the questions. For example, identifying the factors that contribute to insufficient racial diversity in the ERT as well as specific efforts to improve its racial diversity requires the review of historical data, documents, and information and phenomenological inquiry through stakeholder interviews.

### **Archival and Operational Data**

As a qualitative, phenomenological research inquiry, the variables for this study are nominal, meaning there is no numerical ordering but rather categories of information that help describes the phenomenon under study. For example, in studies of diversity in the workplace, age, ethnicity and culture, gender, and race are often identified as factors or variables that influence diversity. This study will specially explore the variable category of race. For example, document analysis will include identifying the number of African American applicants, the number interviewed, the number that passed background investigations, and the number selected for the ERT.

This approach is consistent with several studies of diversity in employment hiring. For example, Hoffman and Stallworth (2008) conducted a study that found racial bias in U.S. law firms unintentional due to employers' false perception of that the "acceptable" hiring pool is small, which inadvertently excluded African American applicants as "unacceptable." Ragins et al. (2012) explored the "degree to which employees were racially or ethnically similar to others in their community and perceptions of their community's diversity climate" as influencing the hiring selection of employers" (p. 755).

The authors conducted a study on spillover of community diversity to the workplace that sampled 2,045 professionals living in communities across the United States (Ragins et al., 2012). The variables for these studies included "race" and "ethnicity" and incorporated document analysis and interviews as data collection methods. As such, the information extrapolated from these data collection methods are

the relevant to the practice problem in this project, as they proved relevant in similar studies.

There is considerable information and data available online from the AmeriCorps official website that can inform the study. However, most of the data for the study resulted from document review and participant interviews. The documents identified for content analysis are generated as part of the ERT normal processes such as recruitment, hiring and employment selection, cohort rosters, marketing, etc. This makes them valid as a source of evidence for the study since they were not specifically generated for the study. Again, the data was and is originally collected as part of the ERT's normal operating processes.

The AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT leadership has provided a letter of agreement to participant in the study and to provide requested documents. In addition, they have also agreed to be interviewed for the study and to facilitate the participation of former leadership and alumni in the study. As a former ERT member, I am familiar with the documents requested and leadership structure and organization to identify those that can inform the study through the interview process.

This historical information will provide insight into how long the demographics issue may have been a problem for ERT and how it may have changed over the years, illustrating whether African American members have decreased over the years or if numbers have always been low.

### **Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study**

Twelve interviews were conducted with ERT program administrators, current ERT members, and former ERT members to learn why they believe African American applicants and membership are low and how the issue may be resolved. As such, purposeful sampling, which “involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011), would be an ideal tool for use in this study, as identifying challenges to racial disparity in ERT cohorts has long been a goal for administrators and alumni alike. This will inevitably lead to potential solutions to improve racial diversity in future cohorts. Whether the identified solutions have been successful or not will be measured by the number of future African American applicants and ERT members.

Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary for current ERT members, ERT administrators, and ERT alumni. To identify interested prospective interview participants, I scheduled a presentation with ERT to present the purpose and significance of this study to ERT in an open forum atmosphere using a PowerPoint presentation with a question and answer session to follow for any further clarification. Following the presentation of the project and its purpose, I asked for volunteers to participate in the study. As diversification of ERT has been a problem for ERT administration for many years, administrators are already committed to participation in the study and accounted for half of the minimum necessary interviews required for the study. The other half of the interviews was conducted with current ERT team leaders,

members, and alumni. The alumni were contacted through the social media accounts for ERT alumni Consent forms were provided prior to interviews to inform participants of the purpose, opportunities, and risks involved with participation in the study.

The interviews were conducted using virtual conferencing technologies such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect, etc. based on the participant's preference and accessibility to the preferred telecommunications technology. All interviews were recorded. The interview questionnaire is included as Appendix A.

### **Document Review**

The document review data collection portion of this study includes the analyzing several key documents, including but not limited to:

- Past Cohort Rosters: Analyzing this information provides demographic data for trend analysis that will illustrate any trends in African American membership throughout the history of the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT.
- Recruitment Materials: Analyzing this information will allow for evaluation of recruitment materials and how they may be adjusted to attract more African American applicants.
- Position Descriptions: This information is significant because it is how the role of AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT members is described to prospective applicants. This information may be adjusted to make the role of a team member more attractive to African American applicants.
- Welcome Packets: This information gives accepted applicants additional information into how the ERT program operates and information about the



communities that ERT members serve in. This is significant because it can be used to address the potential issues that come with serving in rural Missouri as a person of color and how ERT works to mitigate those issues and support its minority volunteers.

- Past Volunteer Evaluations: These evaluations will illustrate African American experiences while serving with ERT and how they perceived their service with ERT. This information can be useful for recruitment purposes, as success stories from past African Americans having served with the program may make service with ERT more attractive to prospective African American applicants.

The documents necessary for the success of this professional administrative study include current recruitment materials, current recruitment strategy, ERT position descriptions, ERT welcome packets, current cohort demographic information, and applicant demographic information. In addition to the information received directly from ERT, I will also review key publications and studies on the topics related to increasing racial diversity, benefits of a more diverse workplace, minorities in conservation, minorities in emergency response, and national statistics and demographics of minorities serving in the AmeriCorps. A few of these studies have already been discussed in this study.

Archival information necessary for this project include past applicant information, past cohort demographic information, past applicant information, past annual reports, past volunteer evaluations, and past program evaluations. Fawcett et al. (2008) suggested

using archival data to compare the results between current and past participants in cases where significant population changes had occurred. This will help with identifying trends in diversity among ERT membership over a period of time.

### **Participant Interviews**

The interview questions (Appendix A) are designed to help determine, operationally, how ERT currently recruits members to serve to identify challenges and opportunities for improving diversity through better recruitment efforts. It is assumed that recruitment methods currently used have not been effective in attracting a diverse group; therefore, this is an area where participants' interviews can provide considerable insight for improving minority membership.

The same interview questions are applicable for ERT volunteers, ERT alumni, ERT leadership and administration, and ERT Board of Directors members. This provides diverse responses to gain a complete insight into how ERT stakeholders perceive the diversity issues with ERT, how that issue may be resolved, and how ERT may move forward with a more diverse group of volunteers as a result of this study. By using the same interview questions for all stakeholders, the study avoided a data overload that may have complicated its findings. This keeps the data flowing with contrasting but focused answers with the aim of providing answers to the research questions.

### **Analysis and Synthesis**

The plan for data organization will be utilizing Microsoft Office applications such as Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. These applications will allow for easier organization of data and the ability to create charts and tables. This will provide for a

simple to follow flow of information that will display many findings from my data collection efforts.

Efforts to maintain data integrity include utilizing established historical data that it is kept in ERT's personal archives as a means for data collection of historical or archival data. Data collected by the interviews are transcribed directly from the recordings so ensure that the direct quotes from participants remain authentic and verbatim. This is to ensure that data in no way can be manipulated to fit the narrative of anyone and will only illustrate factual data that will lead to solutions for ERT's diversification challenges.

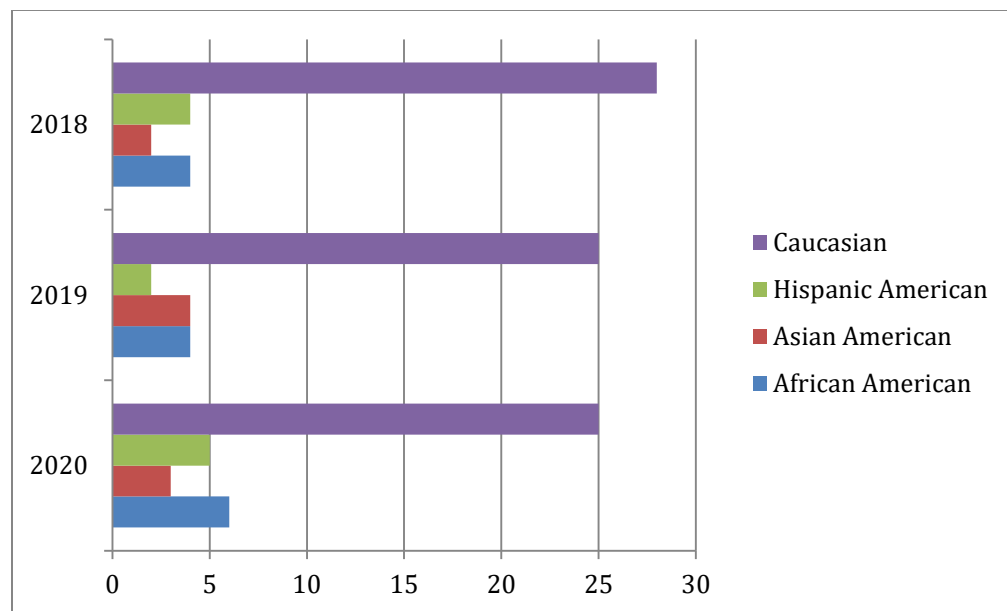
Tables similar to the one illustrated below have been utilized by ERT in an effort to collect demographic information and is a useful tool in identifying trends in applicant and accepted membership demographics for this study.

Table 1

<b>ERT COHORTS</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2018</b>
Caucasian	25	25	28
African American	6	4	4
Asian American	3	4	2
Hispanic American	5	2	4

Once the data is collected from each year of service documents, that information will then be organized and compared to each other to identify any possible trends that will lead to a solution for ERT's diversity challenges. It is important to note that the

current application cycle peaks just before the service year begins in September and the majority of those accepted into the program will be admitted at that time. The incoming cohort can then be compared to the next cohort that will illustrate growth in diversified applications as a result of this study and its findings as illustrated below.



### Summary

The purpose of this study was to improve racial diversity amongst membership within the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team (ERT). Diversity has been an issue for ERT for many years now and this professional administrative study aims to assist with that issue. The study data collection methods included examination of past trends and recruitment methods, as well as interviews with alumni and volunteers to identify why diversity is such a major issue and what can be done to improve this situation. My hypothesis for resolving this issue for the AmeriCorps Saint Louis Emergency Response Team would be that if recruitment methods are adjusted to make ERT

more attractive to minorities and ERT was more visible in African American communities, then African Americans would be more likely to apply for a service position with ERT, increasing diversity amongst its applicant pool and eventually increasing diversity amongst its membership.

In the next section, we will take a look at the findings of the data for this study. This data will illustrate themes and trends that will provide evidence into ERT's diversity challenges and potentially provide answers to their challenges. These findings will be illustrated through tables as illustrated above and from this data recommendations can be made to resolve ERT's diversity challenges.

## Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In this section, I explain and analyze my findings from this professional administrative study and offer recommendations of how to sustainably increase racial diversity amongst AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT membership. As explained in earlier sections, the purpose of this professional administrative study was to identify sustainable solutions to the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT longstanding challenges with diversity amongst its membership. In addition, the purpose includes crafting recommendations to increase the organization's candidacy and membership with future ERT cohorts.

Trend analysis was conducted by using archival data to identify whether there was a point in the history of ERT where achieving diversity became an issue or if it had always been a challenge. Interviews with ERT alumni, administrators, and current team leaders were also conducted to gain insight into how ERT can improve recruitment of African Americans. These interviews also highlighted how ERT life can be made more attractive and comfortable for African American members. Study participants provided their own recommendations as to what actions they would take to sustainably increase diversity in ERT.

### **Findings and Implications**

#### **Trend Analysis**

In conducting trend analysis on past ERT cohorts, I received a cohort list from the Corps Network that contained applicant information of every member that served in ERT during its 28-year history. I recorded the demographic information of every member of

ERT into a spreadsheet, sorted by year served. I found that in its earlier incarnations, there were very few African Americans that have served with ERT, and there were some years that African Americans did not serve in the ERT. It is important to note that from its inception up to Year 18, the ERT had a sister group within AmeriCorps St. Louis called the Education Corps (Ed Corps). The Ed Corps members served as teachers in the St. Louis Public School System, which is a predominantly African American school district. The Ed Corps was far more diverse to the ERT. I interpreted this finding to mean the following:

1. African Americans felt more comfortable working within the St. Louis city limits than on projects in rural Missouri or;
2. Teaching was a far more appealing or rewarding option than working in conservation or emergency management.

Because the representation of African Americans in the ERT was so scarce throughout the ERT's history, I decided to narrow my focus to the past 5 years. Though the numbers of the ERT are still overwhelmingly Caucasian, there was evidence that the ERT has become more diverse with not only African American members, but with other races as well during the last 5 years. The charts and graph below illustrate the racial demographics of ERT members over the past 5 years.

**Table 1**

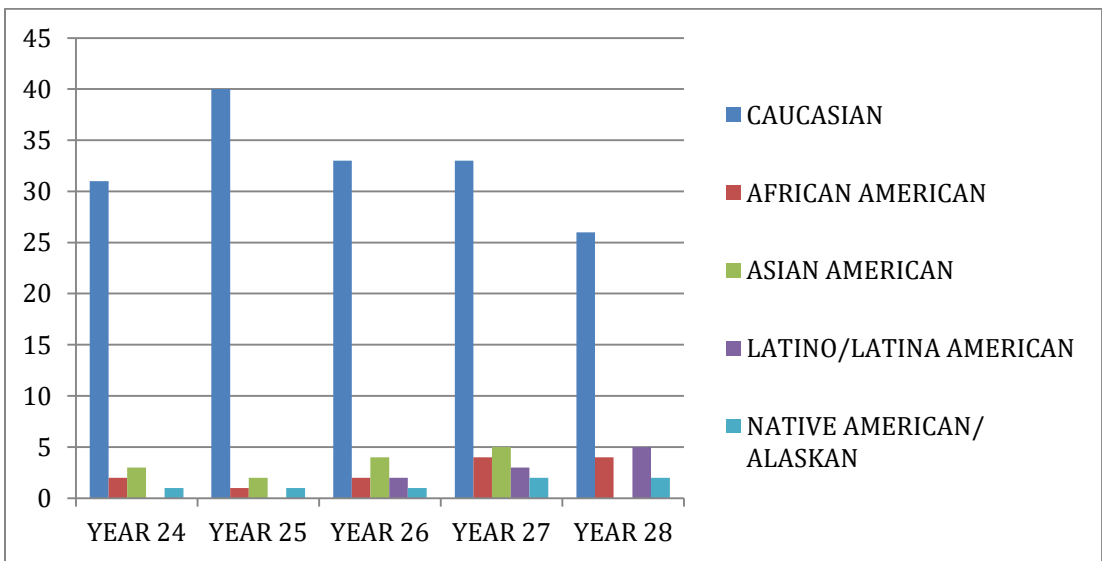
*ERT Cohorts (Year 28 to Year 24)*

ERT cohorts	Year 28	Year 27	Year 26	Year 25	Year 24
Caucasian	26	33	33	40	31
African	4	4	2	1	2

American						
Asian	0	5	4	2	3	
American						
Latino/	5	3	2	0	0	
Latina						
American						
Native	2	2	1	1	1	
American						

**Figure 1**

*ERT Racial Composition (Year 24 to Year 28)*



**Interviews**

**Table 2**

*Composition of Interviews*

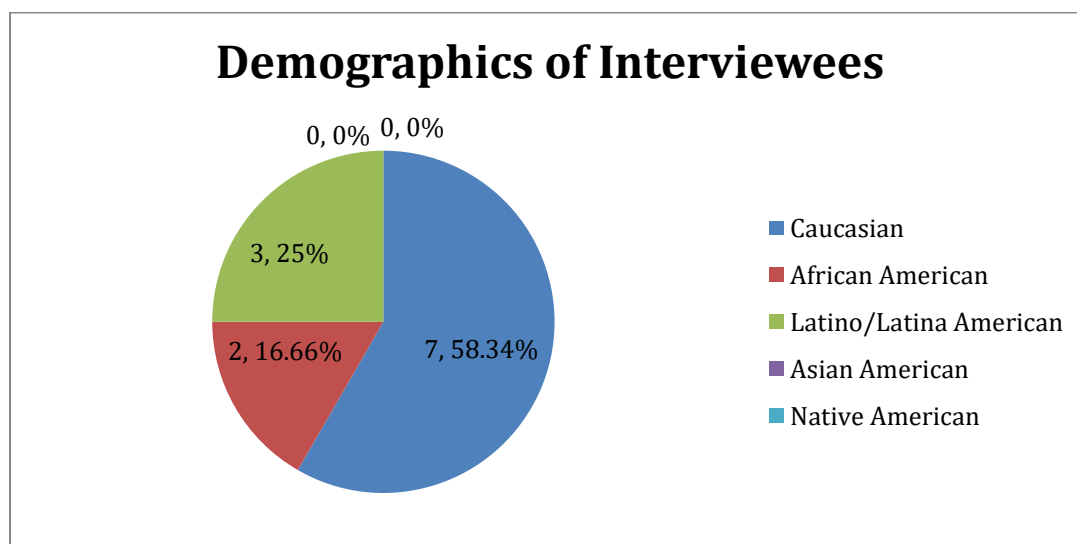
Interviews scheduled	Interviews conducted	In-person interviews	Virtual interviews	Video recorded	Voice recorded
13	12	1	11	10	1



Interviews were conducted with ERT alumni, administrators, team leaders, and current members to gain more insight into the ERT's diversity challenges. In order to find participants for the interviews, I worked with an ERT administrator to make a social media post on ERT's Facebook page and its alumni network page. Those that chose to participate in the interviews contacted me through my personal email account, after which I sent them consent forms for them to review and sign before I scheduled the interviews. Once the participants returned the signed consent forms, the interviews were scheduled and invitations sent to participants. The interviews were conducted via the Zoom virtual platform. The interviewees also referred alumni to me that were interested in participating in the study.

**Figure 2**

*Racial Demographics of Interviewees for Study*



**Table 3**

*Racial Demographics for Interviewees for Study (Percentages)*

Caucasian	African American	Latino/Latina American	Asian American	Native American
7 (58.34%)	2 (16.66%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

A major limitation in the interview process was limited number of African American participants. The majority (58.34%) interviewed for the study were Caucasian. Notwithstanding, many of these participants had strong interests in building equality and inclusion within the ERT program. Another limitation was that the majority of those interviewed had not served with African Americans in the ERT. However, those interviewed shared their insights regarding what would make the ERT more attractive and comfortable for African Americans to participate. Although the recommendations did not come from African American participants, which was expected during the study, the responses of those that were interviewed were well aware of the ERT's diversity and inclusion challenges. The study provided an opportunity for them to share their thoughts and perspectives about the challenges and potential solutions.

One interviewee proposed that the single greatest tool to improved recruitment and retention of African American volunteers for ERT was African American representation themselves. The majority of those interviewed as a part of this study felt that more could be done in terms of supporting African American volunteers and keeping those volunteers safe at project sites. In addition, many agreed that while more support was necessary, African American volunteers should have input on the type of support they needed. This would help avoid African Americans from being perceived as

receiving special treatment and creating an environment of resentment towards them from the other teammates.

Many of those interviewed thought that that “tokenizing” the African American members was counterproductive and would not contribute to greater diversity in the ERT but rather have negative effects on minority volunteers. Interviewees also agreed that increased projects in diversely populated areas would increase interest from minority communities, but also added that African American representation on those projects would help to avoid the perception of “White saviors” conserving the urban environment. Surprisingly, the reputation of St. Louis and rural Missouri did not play a key part or matter much when deciding to serve in Missouri, as gleaned from the interview responses.

ERT as a program and how it has handled racial incidents and improving upon diversity did not come without criticism from those interviewed. One interviewee stated that they would be hesitant to recommend ERT service to potential minority applicants until ERT’s lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training and policies are addressed. There have been recent incidents that have led to ERT members to question the cultural competency of the program and its administrators. The interviewee stated, “AmeriCorps ERT would benefit more from minority volunteers, than minority volunteers would benefit from serving with AmeriCorps ERT.” This interviewee recommended that the program work from within to increase internal cultural competency, expand upon DEI trainings and policies, and provide additional

transparency to ERT members before turning its attention towards increasing diversity through additional minority service members.

### **Document Review**

The document review included collecting information and data from the following sources in help inform the study:

- **Past Cohort Rosters** – An examination into the past 27 cohorts of ERT members revealed a lack of diversity, specifically African American representation. The earlier years of ERT (1994-2012) had little to no diversity at all while its sister group, the Ed Corps, featured a more diverse group. Possible rationale for this major racial discrepancy between the groups could be that the Ed Corps served inner St. Louis city public schools and the ERT had a major focus on rural Missouri conservation initiatives. As such, the group that served the more diverse communities had greater diversity of its membership.
- **Recruitment Materials** – ERT has been active in recruiting through not only its own website, but through the National AmeriCorps online portal and various online job boards. ERT also recruits in-person at career fairs, local festivals, and its social media platforms. ERT’s website provides potential applicants with visuals of the types of work that ERT does over the course of a service year, a history of what the ERT has accomplished over the years, its mission, and what the ERT is doing to positively impact social change in the communities they serve.

- Position Descriptions – The position description as an ERT member are described its job postings. The job description of an ERT member states: “On any given day, an AmeriCorps St. Louis Emergency Response Team Member could: 1) Provide immediate and long-term relief in areas affected by natural disasters, 2) Restore and improve Missouri forests, glades, river-ways, and natural areas, 3) Build and maintain trails, bridges, recreation areas, and more, 4) Fight wild land fires, build fire lines, and participate in prescribed burns in Missouri or Western States, 5) Conduct disaster response and preparedness trainings for communities and other national service organizations (americorpsstl.org, 2021).”
- Welcome Packets – The welcome packets provided to those admitted to serve with ERT includes information on relocating to St. Louis such as an overview of the various neighborhoods surrounding St. Louis where former volunteers have lived. It also provides an equipment list for new volunteers so that they may get the required equipment for service before they arrive to St. Louis. In addition to this information, welcome packets include a guide on physical fitness for serving in ERT and the fitness requirements necessary for service. Finally, there is a list of *frequently asked questions* that answers the common questions that new volunteer may want to know before beginning service. For example, one question asks, “If it is necessary for members to own their own transportation for service?” The response is, “It is not necessary because ERT provides transportation to and from project sites.” There is also a reading list

provided within the welcome pack with books on conservation, wildfires, and disasters. The welcome packet ends with the AmeriCorps pledge that all members recite upon induction into the AmeriCorps.

- Past Volunteer Evaluations – Access to past volunteer evaluations was unavailable during this study. These evaluations would have provided insight into how well or poorly volunteers served during their time as ERT members. This information is not significant to the outcome of this professional administrative study but would have contributed to some insights regarding evaluation criteria for ERT members. A more significant evaluation would be on the part of volunteers providing feedback into how they believe ERT can improve its service year for future cohorts.

### **Social Change Implications**

The social change implications of this study are far-reaching not only for the ERT, but also for the service corps, environmental conservation, and emergency management communities. The identification of solutions to the diversity challenges of ERT could help inform solutions to the diversity challenges of other similar volunteer organizations. For example, it is anticipated that many volunteer organizations in conservation are looking for recommendations on how to improve diversity in their memberships.

There are other issues that may prevent African Americans from being as interested or active in conservation compared to other racial groups. These issues include

exposure to conservation information and programs in their schools and communities.

According to a study completed by DeWese, Toth, and Osborne (2020),

With the exception of two or three participants across Detroit and Greensboro, climate change and the environment did not surface as a top issue among focus group participants in the three cities. Health care, education, racism, school debt, and crime were among the top priorities named in the focus groups.

### Recommendations

Through research and interview responses, I have compiled a list of recommendations in the table below will contribute improving the racial diversity for ERT.

**Table 4: Recommendations for Improving Racial Diversity for ERT**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Implementation</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
Visual Aids	Taking photos and filming videos of the work done on project to highlight the daily activity of ERT service. Upload to ERT website and social media accounts	Can be accomplished by using phones for photos and videos. For example, one member of a team can film the others falling trees, building trail, or conducting invasive species removal.	Highlights potential work while on project  Can be used as a recruitment tool	Could potentially highlight lack of diversity in groups while on project
Increased Urban Projects/Visibility	Increasing ERT initiatives within the St. Louis Metropolitan area.	More projects in the local parks in and around the St. Louis Metropolitan area.	Increasing visibility and awareness locally in St. Louis  New local	Much smaller work sites  Limited project opportunities  Not enough work for so

Recommendation	Explanation	Implementation	Advantages	Limitations
		<p>Establish working relationships with the local park service and departments of conservation.</p> <p>Collaborations with local conservation groups</p>	<p>working relationships and collaborations</p> <p>Increased awareness and interest of ERT for diverse populations</p> <p>Serving more diversely populated areas of Missouri</p>	<p>many service members</p> <p>Drastic change in ERT organizational culture</p>
Tailored Job Postings	Tailoring the ERT job posting based on where the job board is and what audience you are looking to attract	This can be accomplished by altering the job description based on where the job is posted and its intended audiences. For example, the ERT job posting on BIPOC job boards should highlight ERT's diverse membership and opportunities that are not always available to African American applicants	<p>More diverse ERT applicant pool</p> <p>More diverse ERT cohorts</p> <p>Increased interest in ERT by diverse populations</p>	<p>Targeted recruitment strategy</p> <p>Access to BIPOC job boards</p> <p>Funding for increased job postings</p> <p>Identifying appropriate language for attract BIPOC volunteers</p>
Presence at HBCUs	Increasing ERT presence at the HBCUs in Missouri	This can be accomplished by participating in career fairs or student forums at Missouri's HBCUs (Harris-	<p>Increasing awareness of ERT for local African Americans</p> <p>Increasing</p>	<p>Lack of diversity to highlight in densely African American populated area</p> <p>Lack of African</p>



Recommendation	Explanation	Implementation	Advantages	Limitations
		Stowe State University and Lincoln University)	diversity of applicant pool  Increasing diversity of future cohorts	American representation
Field Trips, Day Camps, Local Trainings	Conduct trainings, camps, or field trips for the youth to increase exposure and interest in ERT work	Create trainings and camps for the youth in the public schools in the St. Louis area. These camps can be on identifying plant species, trail building, wilderness first aid, orienting maps, etc.	Increased interest in ERT for youth  Youth capacity building  Increased interest in environmental conservation and emergency management	Identifying time outside of regular ERT duties to conduct trainings  Transportation for youth to attend trainings, camps, and field trips
DEI Training	Expand upon diversity, equity, and inclusion training (DEI) and illustrate DEI initiatives on the ERT website and social media accounts	This expanded DEI training can be added to the training curriculum that ERT utilizes at the beginning of the service year. One area to add to this training should be on how to address, mitigate, or diffuse racially motivated incidents while on project in rural Missouri  EVERYONE should go through the training	Increased capacity on identifying, mitigating, and diffusing racially motivated incidents  A more inclusive ERT cohort  Increased capacity on interacting with people with different backgrounds from your own  By promoting DEI on social	Additional time spent on training

Recommendation	Explanation	Implementation	Advantages	Limitations
		regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, gender, etc.	media and on the ERT website, it shows that ERT is an inclusive environment where everyone is welcome and more diverse applicant pools would be a result	
End of Year Program Evaluations by Volunteers	Volunteers may evaluate the program following their service year	This can be done similar to that of an exit interview to identify what the program can improve on to make service better	Identifies areas of improvement  Leads to progression of program  Volunteers given stake in growth of ERT program	Identifying biases  Differentiating constructive criticisms from critical criticisms
African Americans in Decision Making Positions	Hiring an African American for an administrative position with ERT.	The ideal African American hire for an administrative role would be a former ERT member that would be able to relate to the African American experience while serving with ERT. This makes it easier for BIPOC members to talk their challenges in ERT out with someone who may have been in similar situations,	Promotes African American representation  Increasing diversity at the administrative level  Gives African American volunteers someone they can relate to in management  Increase diversity of applicant pool  Increase	Lack of additional administrative position  Lack of funding for additional administrators  “Tokenism”  “Affirmative Action”

Recommendation	Explanation	Implementation	Advantages	Limitations
Survey Alumni	Survey alumni to gain insights into their personal experiences with ERT, particularly BIPOC alumni	A survey can be sent out either through the alumni email directory of through social media for alumni to take to identify ways in which the program can improve in many different areas.	<p>diversity of ERT cohorts</p> <p>Identify areas for growth for ERT</p> <p>Identify trends of progression or regression for ERT as a program</p> <p>Alumni take stake in growth of the program</p>	<p>Alumni may be out of touch with growth of the program</p> <p>Availability of Alumni network</p> <p>Lack of diversity within alumni network</p>
Collaborating with Partners for Safety of Minority Volunteers	Working with project site partners to ensure safety of BIPOC volunteers while on service	ERT administrators and project site partners may collaborate so that ERT volunteers, particularly minority volunteers, have additional local support should any racially motivated incidents occur while on project in rural Missouri.	<p>Rapid response time in case of racially motivated incidents</p> <p>Increased trust between ERT and project collaborators in rural Missouri</p>	<p>Willingness of partners to collaborate to mitigate racially motivated incidents</p> <p>Increased reliance on partners to protect ERT volunteers</p> <p>BIPOC volunteers receiving “special treatment” on project</p>
Additional Living Assistance	Assistance with life in ERT including applying for food stamps, finding housing, applying for	Focused trainings on applying for food stamps, student loan deferment, and student loan forbearance.	<p>Increased living experience and conditions for ERT members.</p> <p>Ease in locating housing before</p>	<p>Group trips to apply for food stamps can be very time consuming.</p> <p>Funding for</p>

Recommendation	Explanation	Implementation	Advantages	Limitations
	<p>student loan deferment or forbearance, and assistance in obtaining required service equipment (fire boots, tents, PPE, etc.)</p>	<p>Trips to food stamp office.</p> <p>Access to housing information prior to arriving to St. Louis for service. Housing information from prior ERT members for potential housing.</p> <p>Equipment rental available for ERT members that are in need of it for service at reduced prices. This prevents members from having to purchase expensive and new equipment, while adding to ERT program funding</p>	<p>arriving to St. Louis.</p> <p>No student loan payments during service year.</p> <p>Increased opportunity for those without funds prior to joining ERT to obtain equipment for service at reduced costs.</p>	<p>equipment used for rentals may be minimal.</p>
<p>Cease Projects in Rural Missouri</p>	<p>Discontinue ERT service in rural Missouri communities and focus more on projects near or within the Metropolitan St. Louis, MO area</p>	<p>Remove ERT for rural work environment, placing more emphasis on urban conservation projects</p>	<p>Better service for more diversely populated communities</p> <p>Increased visibility</p> <p>Reduction in urban pollution</p>	<p>Loss of funding received from rural projects</p> <p>Loss of long-standing working relationships and collaborators</p> <p>Drastic change in organizational culture</p>

### **Strength and Limitations**

There are very significant strengths and few limitations to this study. For example, a major strength is the vast ERT alumni network. Over the past 28 years, more than 1,500 Americans have served at least one year as a member of the ERT. Many had varying experiences during their time with ERT, and many can all provide different insights and opinions regarding how they feel about their service year. When interviewing the alumni for this study, numerous responses to the same questions provided a more complete view of experiences of the ERT member. These alumni were enthusiastic about participating in a study on diversity of the ERT because the topic was rarely addressed, if at all, during their service years at the ERT.

Unfortunately, the alumni network also provides limitations for the project as well. Because ERT lacked diversity for so many years, there is a significant amount of ERT alumni that either had no African American members in their cohorts or never had any African Americans on their team during their service year. This resulted in a lack of insight into the African American service experience while in ERT. Only those who had close relationships with African American members could share their experiences. Many interview responses were the personal opinions of those interviewed, rather than reflections of real experiences with African American in the ERT, except for the few African American volunteers interviewed for this study.

Another limitation was the lack of African American alumni to this study. There were so few African American alumni and many could not be reached for the study for various reasons. Once ERT memberships become more diverse, similar studies may be

conducted in the future that will provide better insight into the African American experience in the ERT, directly from African Americans themselves.

### **Summary**

The trend analysis conducted as a part of this study illustrated how diversity has always been a challenge for ERT cohorts, but has seen increases in African American membership over the past 10 years. Recommendations from interviews with ERT alumni were also identified as a means for continuing to increase African American membership in ERT, increasing African American applicants for roles with ERT, and enhancing the ERT experience for African American members during their service years.

In the next section, I discussed how those recommendations will be delivered to and used by ERT for increasing African American membership. I will also indicate who the audience should be for this study and how it can not only be relevant for them and the ERT program, but also for service groups similar to ERT and the environmental conservation, and emergency management fields as well.

## Section 5: Dissemination Plan

### **Deliverables**

The dissemination plan for this professional administrative study is to present recommendations to ERT to use for the next applicant cycles in 2022 for the incoming cohort (Year 29), beginning in September 2022. This would include recommendations for increasing recruitment of diverse populations, operational suggestions to make ERT more attractive and comfortable for African American applicants and members, and professional and leadership development initiatives for addressing racial issues and mitigation of racially motivated incidents.

A briefing with ERT administration will be scheduled to discuss the recommendations identified through this professional administrative study and explore strategies for implementation. The recommendations are in Appendix D. I will provide the administrators with the recommendations chart, as it not only identifies and explains the recommendations, but also identifies how to implement those recommendations and the strengths and limitations of proposed recommendations. Nonetheless, it is important to have the input of ERT administration in identifying implementation strategies.

The goal of providing these recommendations in a briefing is so that ERT administration can implement those recommendations into their Year 29 application cycle that begins in March 2022. For example, ERT administrators can plan to participate in Spring 2022 career fairs at HBCUs in St. Louis as recommended through this professional administrative study. Another recommendation necessary for the upcoming application cycle are tailoring job descriptions based on where the job is posted. By using

the recommendations identified as a result of this professional administrative study, ERT would be taking action in cultivating a more diverse ERT cohort for fall 2022 and beyond. The results of the recommendations presented in this professional administrative study to the ERT would potentially result in an increase in not only African American applicants, but also African American members for the foreseeable future. The most appropriate audiences for this study would be ERT administrators, alumni, and team members as their participation in carrying out the recommendations presented in this professional administrative study are vitally important to the success of those recommendations.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the AmeriCorps Saint Louis ERT has had longstanding challenges addressing racial diversity amongst its members, but through following the recommendations offered as a result of this professional administrative study, ERT is taking action in sustainably addressing its diversity challenges for its future cohorts. As stated by Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr., considered by many to be a founder of what is today known as workplace diversity and inclusion, “creating and managing a diverse workforce is a process, not a destination.” AmeriCorps ERT has chosen to take on a more active role in that process.



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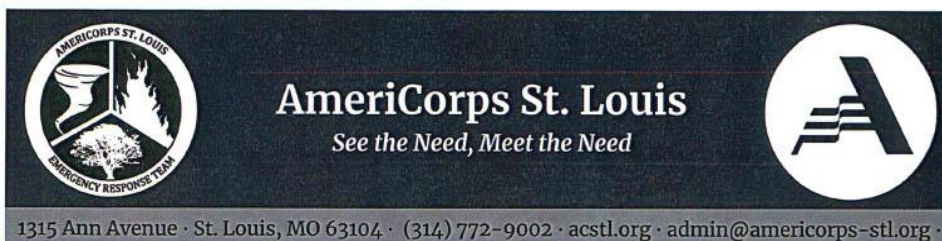
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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What actions can be taken by ERT management during the recruitment process to attract a more diverse applicant pool?
2. What methods could ERT management employ to make a service year more attractive for African American applicants?
3. What concerns about ERT may turn off potential African American applicants and what can ERT do to address those concerns?
4. Given that most of ERT's project sites are located in rural Missouri, do you feel that minority members are adequately supported in those areas given the state's established history of racism outside of its major cities?
5. What initiatives do you believe may be put into place to make a service year with ERT more comfortable for African American members?
6. Do you feel that additional support for African American members is necessary while out on project in rural Missouri?
7. Do you believe that increased visibility of ERT in African American neighborhoods would result in higher African American applications to join the ERT?
8. What impact, if any, do you believe that the reputation of the city of Saint Louis and the state of Missouri have on African American applicant rates?
9. How effective do you believe the support system is within ERT for members that are people of color?

10. Do you personally have and recommendations on how to increase diversity amongst ERT membership?

## Appendix B: AmeriCorps ERT Project Commitment



June 9, 2021

Dear Mr. Michael McLemore,

Based on our review of your research prospectus, AmeriCorps St. Louis gives you permission to conduct the study entitled "A Comprehensive Study into Increasing Racial Diversity in America's Service Corps." The purpose of the study being to examine an administrative issue within a nonprofit organization (AmeriCorps St. Louis) - in order to increase racial diversity amongst service groups with the goal of identifying solutions to increase African-American representation within those groups.

As part of this study, I authorize you to collect pre-determined, relevant, and approved information from AmeriCorps St. Louis Members and Staff to inform the development of the proposed capstone project.

I understand that the student will not be naming the organization, AmeriCorps St. Louis, in the doctoral project report that may be published to ProQuest. I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and ensure this plan complies with the organization's current policies and specific interest in the topic of increased diversification.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the students supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB and AmeriCorps St. Louis.

Sincerely,

Kenan Ender  
Executive Director



### Appendix C: ERT Program Recommendations

1. Visual Aids – Many participants in this study identified visual aids as a powerful tool for recruitment in today’s work environment. This includes videos of ERT members falling trees, conducting invasive species removal, fire line building, trail building, prescribed burns, wildfires, and ERT’s disaster roles in disaster response. Important for increasing racial diversity in these visual aids would be the inclusion and visibility of African American ERT members in these photos and videos. The ideal place for these visuals would be on all ERT social network platforms and the ERT website.
2. Increased Urban Visibility and Projects – Another key recommendation would be to increase visibility of ERT in more urban environments through its projects. There are currently projects in urban parks in St. Louis including those at Forest Park and O’Fallon Park, but increased work and visibility in diversely populated areas could produce increased interest in the work and the ERT program. This would then increase local applications to the program, particularly of African Americans.
3. Tailored Job Postings – Tailoring job postings based on where the job is posted may have an impact on who applies for the position. The job posting should match the desired audience that you are trying to reach. In the case of African Americans joining ERT adding details life in the outdoors and how ERT is active in diversity and inclusion efforts would be beneficial in attracting a more diverse applicant pool than would be a post providing a

basic overview of the type of work you would be doing. It would also be beneficial to add quotes from African American alumni about the program that can really speak more to the experience of having had served with ERT as an African American member.

4. Presence at HBCUs and Student Unions – There are two HBCUs in the state of Missouri, including one in the city of Saint Louis. The city of Saint Louis is home to Harris-Stowe State University and Lincoln University in located in Jefferson City, the capital city of Missouri. Increased presence of ERT at both locations would lead to increased applications from both universities.
5. Field Trips, Day Camps, Local Trainings – One participant recommended day camps or field trips with youth as young as junior high school students as a way to gauge interest in the program and conservation as a future potential career choice. One great experience at a day camp with ERT members could shape impressionable minds to want to become more involved in either environmental conservation or emergency management. For example, ERT holding first aid trainings for youth has the potential to lead to future doctors, nurses, or EMTs, while conservation trainings may lead to future conservationists, park rangers, botanists, or arborists.
6. DEI Training – Expanded DEI training is another recommendation offered by former ERT members as a solution for making ERT more comfortable for its African American members. The goal of DEI training as stated by Lewis and Baron (2021) “is to help members become more culturally competent,

empathetic, and self-aware.” “It aims to build awareness and skills which support marginalized employees and help to cultivate a safe, compassionate and equitable office culture where everyone feels valued” (instride, 2021).

With more understanding and compassion from within ERT itself, the service experience with ERT would become far more comfortable for its African American members. This is vitally important, given that the majority of ERT projects take place in rural Missouri, where the potential for racial incidents is far higher than that within the city of St. Louis.

7. End of Year Program Evaluations – One study participant recommended that ERT members evaluate the program at the end of their service year. This feedback potentially gives ERT further recommendations on areas where it can improve for future cohorts. The participant didn’t feel as though they had nearly as much say in the program or how they would change it if they could, so it was recommended that as a part of volunteer evaluation at the end of the service year that volunteers are also able to evaluate the program itself. Evaluations from African American members could lead to the improvement of the African American experience while serving with ERT.
8. African Americans in Positions of Power – Multiple participants stated that they believed that African Americans in decision making positions would benefit African American ERT members and the applicant rates of African Americans to ERT. It would also give African American member the opportunity to have someone that would relate to their life in ERT inside the

office that they could confide in for various different reasons, especially racially motivated incidents.

9. Survey Alumni – Participants recommended ERT administrators surveying ERT alumni as a means of looking to the vast alumni network for recommendations on improving the program. This is very relevant, as surveying African American alumni would provide further insight into the African American experience while serving with ERT and what ERT leadership can do improve upon those experiences.
10. Collaborating with Partners for the Safety of Minority Volunteers – One participant recommended collaborating with partners while on project in rural Missouri to provide added support for African American volunteers to avoid any potential racially motivated incidents. The provides for local protection while on project, as ERT projects are often hours away from ERT headquarters in Saint Louis. With local protections for African American members, it means less pressure on team leaders and immediate assistance for volunteers, rather than waiting hours for ERT administrators in Saint Louis to respond.
11. Additional Living Assistance – Participants identified additional living assistance as another recommendation for making life within ERT easier. This is not purely a financial recommendation, but rather assisting volunteers with finding housing in Saint Louis, assisting with applying for food stamps, assistance applying for student loan deferment or forbearance, and helping

volunteers with being outfitted for the service year with fire boots, sleeping bags, protective gear, etc. The participant stated that these can be economic hardships for those who want to serve but are without enough money saved to be able to afford to serve with ERT. This additional living assistance would result in higher application rates and dispel the opinion that only people with money are able to volunteer.

12. Cease Projects in Rural Missouri – One participant recommended that ERT cease projects in rural Missouri and focus more on urban environmental conservation. This is a valid recommendation, as more projects within the city would not only increase local and African American applicants, but would also significantly decrease any possibility of racially motivated incidents against African American volunteers.