

Intern Programs: A Solution for Wildlife Enforcement Agencies

Robert Goodrich, *Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Game Warden Training Academy, 100 W. 50th St., Austin, TX 78751*

Abstract: As our nation grows in a successful economy, wildlife enforcement agencies find themselves in a highly competitive race to recruit and develop qualified applicants for the ever-changing career of the wildlife enforcement officer. This challenge is not limited to any one area of the country and solutions must be as innovative as the technological advances our society is experiencing. Agencies that have developed standards for the level of experience and education they require in their officers, must also develop programs that target the recruitment and retention of those officers. Intern programs have often been viewed as a means to show effort on the part of agencies to hire minority and female applicants and yet most have not succeeded. An effective intern program, in conjunction with a minority recruitment plan, can accomplish the goal of introducing interested applicants to the career of the wildlife enforcement officer while developing and recognizing potential highly qualified individuals for those positions.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 54:493-499

Recent statistical data from the U.S. Department of education reflects that labor force participation by 25-year-old adults with a bachelor's degree received in the last year was at 80% and climbing. In addition, unemployment statistics indicate a rate of unemployment for 25-year-olds with bachelor degrees at 1.8% of persons 25 years old and over in the United States.

This data is telling recruiters and managers in wildlife enforcement agencies what they have already experienced in the workplace, that the pool of qualified college applicants is steadily being drained by the ever-increasing demand of a successful economy.

While many agencies are not requiring a bachelor's degree to qualify for the position of wildlife enforcement officer, the trend toward that requirement is increasing. Also government careers, which are historically not as rewarding in pay and benefits as the business community, are traditionally not selected by qualified applicants when an economy is booming. It is also important to realize that most agencies are trying to hire minority and female applicants out of the same pool, while attempting to reach federal guidelines in minority hiring. Yet state wildlife enforcement agencies want what all employers want, the best person for the job.

To meet these challenges was my goal as the recruiter/instructor for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Game Warden Academy. I first began to look at the intern program that currently existed in the department. This program was not unlike many others in agencies and businesses alike: interns were randomly selected with applicable educational requirements. No performance plan was in effect other than to have a summer job and gain experience in a related field. The program had no formal development plan for applicants or means to recognize highly desirable interns that displayed unique abilities to become a wildlife enforcement officer. The program was specifically targeting minorities and females as a means to generate interest in these groups in the field of wildlife enforcement.

First, I reviewed the success of the program over several years and could not find an appreciative number of minority and or female applicants that were a direct result of the intern recruiting effort. In short, the plan wasn't working, so we had to develop a new plan. The first question every organization must ask itself in any recruiting process is what qualifications should my employee have? Every agency must make qualification requirements based on the needs and goals of their organization.

Our education requirement of a bachelor's degree does facilitate the education process for officers by getting applicants who have demonstrated learning ability, as we have to cover a large amount of information in a short period of time. Whatever the qualifications, the next decision is how and where we are going to contact those applicants, followed by the challenge of finding a means to attract these potential applicants to our organization. Obviously, state colleges and universities were the recruitment sites we targeted. Coordination with career placement offices at colleges and universities aided us in identifying career fairs and other recruitment activities that would be the most beneficial. To meet minority hiring goals, we targeted colleges and universities with a high minority and female student population. We also took into consideration, before attending functions at specific institutions, the ability of that institution to provide major coursework in subjects that we deemed a requirement of the position. Some consideration must also be given to colleges and universities in other states as minority enrollment may be higher.

With the area of recruitment targeted to meet your organization's needs, you now need a program to attract the best-interested applicants and to identify and retain them. I have developed the intern program to accomplish both of those tasks.

This program begins with an application process that specifically states the goal of the program. These goals are specifically to introduce interested college students to career opportunities in the Law Enforcement Division, and provide opportunities to gain practical experience and training in this field. It also provides the applicant with a period of employment (summer) and the requirements of the position.

Choosing Interns

The Law Enforcement Intern Program at Texas Parks and Wildlife begins with the selection process. This is a process of elimination beginning with the pool of applicants and the budgeted number of positions. Obviously, every organization wants

a large pool of qualified applicants to choose from, even if the budgeted number of positions are small, thus allowing it to be more selective by encouraging competition between applicants. Initially, the first elimination may be the number of semester hours that each applicant has accrued to that point. Even though we encourage all applicants with a minimum of 12 semester hours and a GPA of 2.0 or higher to apply for the intern positions, we realistically would give more consideration to an applicant with 60 or more semester hours. These qualified applicants demonstrate an ability to complete college level work on a continuing basis and will be more readily available to evolve to a permanent position in the workforce.

The selected applicants are then scheduled for an interview, which is conducted mostly over the telephone yet can be done in person if conditions allow. I have conducted interviews both ways and found either can be effective if structured effectively.

Interviews are a very important part of the hiring process and should be structured to maintain a legal hiring process as well as meet the goals and needs of the organization. The interview questions can be developed by first conducting a job analysis of the position, identifying the major job requirements and the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed to accomplish these requirements. These KSAs need to be measurable, directly related to the position criteria and documented.

Typically, we have developed interview questions for wildlife enforcement intern applicants that demonstrate the ability to communicate orally, and provide for specific suggestions to resolve problems while remaining calm, non-threatening, and not alienating others. We also ask questions relating to position requirements that may be a simple yes or no answer, but may lead to identifying an inability to complete job tasks, such as describing all the physical activities of the job and asking the applicant if he or she can accept these requirements. Care should be taken here not to accept any answer except yes or no as you would not want to discuss medical conditions.

In addition to interview questions, I have assigned a value to the application submitted by the applicants to determine their ability to complete written assignments and to communicate in writing. These are measurable and relate directly to the KSAs of the position, as interns are required to complete monthly records and reports. In addition I am considering an optional written exercise for future selection processes.

All these selection criteria must be measurable. We have found that establishing a point value in a range of 1–2 points for the worst response up to 9–10 for an outstanding answer with specific guidelines for establishing these scores can result in a fair and measurable selection process. The interviewer must ask all the question the same and not provide any explanations or additional information to the applicants so as to remain fair and unbiased in this process. I will re-read the question for applicants but I will not provide additional information nor will I explain any circumstances in the question. Interview training should be considered by all agencies as inappropriate questions and responses could lead to an unfavorable review of your hiring process.

Documentation through this process cannot be emphasized enough. That old axiom for law enforcement officers, if it wasn't written down it probably didn't happen, is also true for managers of hiring programs. However, you will learn in interview training that that you should only record the facts, not your feelings or your subjective observations of applicants as these can lead to a challenge of your selection process. Your decision to select a candidate for the position should be based on the selection criteria you have put in place and the fair, unbiased scoring of those criteria. Typically, most organizations have a final selection interview that determines the selection of the candidate, however we have combined the interview and written scoring into a ranking selection process. This process also facilitates selecting additional applicants to fill recently created positions or to continue down the list when selected applicants have decided to decline the position for employment elsewhere.

The Orientation Process

After selecting your interns for the period of employment, which typically for TPWD is during the summer (this is the off-time for students), you must decide what orientation process will work for your organization. Over the years we have developed an orientation program that allows us to provide an overview of the work interns will be required to do as well as familiarize the interns with the basic requirements of becoming a game warden cadet should they decide to pursue this career.

Our intern orientation is conducted at the Game Warden Training Academy. Interns are assigned dorm rooms to simulate the conditions that cadets would be in during an academy. We require interns to furnish and wear (while on duty) uniforms and maintain them in a professional manner. The orientation covers an overview of water safety and sport fishing laws, interns' role in use of force, health and safety, firearms familiarization, policies and procedures, radio communications, records and reports, and defensive tactics familiarization.

In addition, this past year I added physical awareness and interview skills training to the orientation schedule to expose the interns to the cadet selection process criteria. After orientation, interns are sent to report to their field duty station under the supervision of the district captain, to work with game wardens in the district. These assignments are based on the geographic preference that interns place on their application, as we do not pay interns enough to require them to relocate. Basically, we give orientation as to what the job of game warden is, the selection criteria for game warden, and then release the intern to the field to work with the field officers. The interns that apply themselves will gain knowledge and experience from the field officers that they will bring with them to the interview selection process for game warden cadet.

Internships as a Tool for Recruitment

Most intern programs basically end here. I wanted to take these program forward to become a tool for recruitment, selection, and retention of potential game warden cadets.

Often, interns would work for the summer and then come to a selection process for game warden cadets and fail to test and interview well. Some would even fail to complete the minimum physical test.

To address this challenge I began at the end of the intern summer job. That may sound backwards but it is logical, let me explain. Interns would complete the summer and have a quick job review with their supervisor which mainly consisted of filling out a form that said, would you hire this person back, yes or no. If the supervisor checked yes the intern would be allowed back in the program the following year and could continue until the intern graduated from college.

There was no performance evaluation plan with goals and objectives to guide and coach the intern along a path towards employment or to recognize an intern that was not willing to reach the goals and objectives required by the position.

I established a plan that accomplished the need for a recruitment, selection, and retention tool to provide the most valuable asset any wildlife enforcement agency ever has, the qualified people that become their wildlife enforcement officers.

An Evaluation with Two Goals

The performance evaluation for summer interns for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department had to accomplish 2 major goals. First, it had to measurably reflect the knowledge, skills and abilities of a game warden cadet and secondly, it had to have the ability to develop an intern into an acceptable applicant for the position of game warden cadet. This had to be accomplished while the intern was completing job-related tasks with a field game warden.

The first step for the performance evaluation process is to write a position description for the job. I include our description; however, yours may vary based on your agencies, needs and the knowledge, skill and abilities required to meet those needs.

Law Enforcement Intern Job Description

The minimum qualifications for the Law Enforcement Intern Program include current status as an undergraduate or graduate student at an accredited college or university at the time of application with an acceptable grade point average and prescribed number of semester hours toward a degree plan in a related field. In addition to other departmental requirements, law enforcement intern applicants must be able to meet minimum qualifications for a Game Warden Cadet often resulting in a competitive selection process. After completing the Law Enforcement Student Intern Orientation Program at the Texas Game Warden Training Academy in Austin, the intern is assigned to report to the field supervisor and subsequently assigned to work with one or more Texas Game Wardens in their area of summer assignment. The intern will observe and assist the game warden in his or her regular duties of enforcement of natural resource conservation, boating, and public safety regulations

While interns do not act or portray themselves as a peace officer, they do maintain all rights and responsibilities as a private citizen in regards to aiding a peace officer.

Interns are instructed and participate in maintenance of department equipment, prepare reports of enforcement activities, and assist in presenting educational programs concerning department activities to the public as required. Interns are instructed in and expected to maintain a positive image with the public while working with a game warden and during the period of employment with the department.

Interns are evaluated by their assigned supervisor during the summer employment period and must attain an acceptable rating in all areas of work performance criteria to remain in the program.

After this job description was developed, I created a law enforcement intern performance evaluation. The evaluation contained specific goals and accomplishments that were to be measured and evaluated during the period of employment. These goals and accomplishments were directly related to the knowledge, skills and abilities required for Game Warden cadets, but with specific job related tasks for the intern. These performance areas consisted of interpersonal skills, oral communication, written communications, initiative, self-control, decision making, math skills, safety, reading and analytical skills, and personal grooming. The measurability for the evaluation was based on a performance rating that ranged from exceeding the job requirements to unsatisfactory performance.

Field Evaluation Guidelines

Then I developed field evaluation guidelines for the intern program. These guidelines began with the field supervisor having an entrance interview with the intern. In this interview the supervisor reviewed the performance evaluation with the intern. The intern would then understand the job tasks and what constituted acceptable or unacceptable performance. After this initial review the intern would sign and date the form with a statement that their signature indicated he or she understood the basis on which they would be evaluated.

As in all performance evaluation feedback, documentation and counseling are paramount to their success. To facilitate this I developed a field warden intern performance evaluation form. This gave the field warden a buy in to the program and channeled information to the supervisor about the intern's daily performance. Game wardens are encouraged to act as mentors and advisors to assist interns in obtaining their goals. In addition, supervisors should continuously meet with interns to provide ongoing feedback on their overall performance. The final review of the intern's performance for the period will include a review of the performance evaluation by the commander of the region. The intern coordinator is responsible for archiving the performance evaluation.

If interns receive an acceptable performance rating they may be allowed to continue the following year in the program.

I also solicit feedback from supervisors on how the program could be improved. Be prepared to change or adapt your program as often field personnel can add innovative ideas to improve it.

This concluded the hiring and retention process of the intern program but did

not provide any additional incentive for students to enter the program or to move forward to the position of game warden cadet.

Facilitating Intern Hiring

After demonstrating to the director of the Law Enforcement Division and the executive director of Texas Parks and Wildlife that this program could be an effective means of hiring, retaining, and developing personnel for the position of game warden cadet, they permitted me to take the next step.

This step consisted of permitting Game Warden Cadet applicants that had been interns during a period 12 months prior to the application process to obtain exemptions from the selection process based on their performance as interns.

Specifically, these exemptions could be from the entrance exam and or the regional level interview. This was an obvious decision for me as each region had at least one summer to review its assigned interns and to evaluate them accordingly. Why would those regions need to test this person or interview them and rank them? To bring the interns straight to the next level of the selection process was the obvious logical decision. Yet this was the incentive, the old carrot on the stick as it were, that would motivate qualified individuals to not only join our organization as interns but to excel in their performance with us. In addition, this promoted competition between the interns and identified interns unable to meet the high standards we had established for game warden applicants in Texas.

This program was reviewed, analyzed, and accepted by the training and executive staff. We also wrote an operational procedure to document the program and provide written guidelines. In the last several years, game warden cadets that were interns have done extremely well in the academy and gone on to become highly qualified officers.

Explaining this program to potential applicants surrounding the booth at a career day or job fair generates interest to sign up, especially for applicants who know they can do well in the career of a wildlife enforcement officer.

The overview of this program is basically simple: provide an incentive to attract the best qualified applicants, have in place a means to identify and select those applicants, provide a tool that identifies and develops people through job performance and measurable objectives and finally never lose the ability to adapt and change a program based on the needs of your agency.

This intern program may not be feasible for your organization, but consider modifications that allow you to be more effective in the recruitment and retention of wildlife enforcement officers.