



## **Building the Federal Workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Pathways for Graduate Students**

### **A NASPAA Policy Statement <sup>1</sup>**

The next decade will bring critical challenges to the United States and our federal government: to take on bigger, more wickedly complex policy problems at the same time that unrelenting fiscal pressures demand a smaller and more efficient government workforce. Health care reform, global environment and health, and financial oversight reform are merely some of the more recent additions to the policy list. The management challenges are legion, as well: to address the enormous sprawl of government to make it more accountable and more productive, just as vast stores of human capital and institutional knowledge go fleeing out the back door of the government into retirement in unprecedented numbers.

With all these policy, fiscal, and management pressures, now, more than ever, it is essential that we ensure that our government *works*. We must begin by hiring well. We have taken it for granted that smart, talented people will choose to work in government. But a basic reality is that the nation's ability to address the impending challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century governance rests on our ability to recruit and hire a new generation of leaders. In recent years, considerable barriers to that goal have been erected. It is time to tear them down, and instead aggressively pursue those individuals who can come up to speed quickly and bring their skills to bear as soon as possible--to budget, and manage, and analyze, and govern our way through this decade and beyond. This is especially true for our most able future leaders: those who have committed themselves to public service and who have studied in the nation's graduate programs. They too often find insurmountable obstacles along the pathway to entering public service and launching the careers for which they've prepared.

This paper looks at what graduate students offer this country, addressing first the numbers and skills of this potential talent pool, then examining the barriers to their service, and finally proposing what we can do about it. We are at an absolutely critical moment in our nation's history: if we do not, or cannot, act to recruit graduate students in significant numbers into government employment, we put at risk the future of the ability of government to adequately serve its citizens.

### **The Scale of Graduate Education**

American universities graduate over 600,000 individuals with masters degrees annually. Those numbers include two essential categories of graduates: 1) those ready to take on the management challenges of government in the knowledge age, and 2) those with the technical and scientific skills to bring the federal government to the cutting edge of technical competence.

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<sup>1</sup> Approved December 7, 2010, by NASPAA's Policy Issues Committee. Second in a series. v3.0.

- In recent years, more than 10,000 students have graduated each year with masters degrees in public administration, public policy, and public management, demonstrating that they are capable of managing people, networks, projects, budgets, contracts, and IT.
- More than 125,000 graduates each year have earned science and engineering masters degrees, possessing technical skills critical to the federal government.

Graduate students are more diverse than ever: in 2008, more than 65,000 masters degrees were awarded to black students, and almost 37,000 to Hispanics.<sup>2</sup>

The data also show that hiring graduate students does not compete with the objective of hiring veterans, another vital goal in government hiring. Graduate students increasingly overlap with veterans status, thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill: 33,605, or more than 10%, of the GI Bill recipients in the first three quarters of Fiscal Year 2010 were pursuing graduate degrees.<sup>3</sup> Those numbers represent a sizeable down payment on expanding federal hiring of graduate degree-holding veterans.

### **The Skills of Graduate Students**

Let us envision the kind of workforce that the government needs to tackle the complex management and fiscal problems that it faces, both currently and in the future. Today's graduate students are tomorrow's leaders who can leverage a smaller government's resources to produce the results that citizens expect. They can analyze and implement ways to slash the cost of purchasing and acquisition, enhance performance management, conduct evidence-based policymaking, and deploy the latest information technology. These future leaders will demonstrate public accountability and transparency, foster effective networks for policy and service delivery, and drive home cost-effectiveness every day on behalf of the American taxpayer. There is nothing in efficient and accountable government these recent graduates cannot tackle with their knowledge and skills, and with their boldness and zest for innovation. In short, they can make it happen.

We are producing these leaders, most notably through our graduate programs—but all too often the current system of federal hiring makes it difficult or impossible for them to find their way into government service. This gap is particularly vexing because these graduates include those schooled in such critical subjects as grant management; auditing and investigating; human resources; intelligence analysis and cyber security; information technology specialties, and financial analysis and risk management—all areas identified as hard-to-fill positions in recent reports.<sup>4</sup>

We *can*—indeed, we *must*—attract those graduates who *want* to serve in the public sector but, in the current system, would not consider entering federal service. To accomplish this, we have to create career pathways that make use of their talents and abilities and offer them the opportunity to develop. We need routes into the federal government that prize skills and capture potential at the

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<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “Digest of Education Statistics 2009”, Table 289.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics include active duty servicemembers, Veterans, reservists, and dependents. Data supplied by the Education Service of the Veterans Administration, December 2010.

<sup>4</sup> The Partnership for Public Service presentation, “Lost in Translation: Finding the Right Federal Fit,” August 2010, [http://ourpublicservice.org/OPS/dropbox/Lost\\_in\\_Translation\\_Webinar.pdf](http://ourpublicservice.org/OPS/dropbox/Lost_in_Translation_Webinar.pdf)

point of entry and then continue to help these capable individuals develop their careers in public service.

### **Pathways for Graduate Students into Federal Service**

Compared to other advanced nations, our ability to recruit highly skilled graduate students into the federal government is an embarrassing failure. None of the other G8 countries question the importance of specialized recruitment tracks for recent graduates. In fact, many of them have redoubled their student recruitment efforts, despite budget retrenchments, in anticipation of their own looming retirement risk. To quote Canadian government recommendations: “The current context of fiscal restraint makes renewal even more critical for the Public Service. Targeted recruitment and continual improvements to our workplace are all required for us to become more efficient while strengthening our capacity to respond to the challenges facing Canada both domestically and globally. We must remain dynamic and relevant in our complex and unpredictable world.”<sup>5</sup> Further, unlike other G8 nations we often saddle professionally trained civil servants with large student loan debt repayment. While the federal government does possess a potential recruitment and retention tool, student loan repayment benefits, recent statistics show that it has been moving *away* from using it. “CHCOs [chief human capital officers in federal agencies] indicate that it has become more difficult to use student loan repayments over the past two years, with the percentage saying it was useful to a great or very great extent declining dramatically from 52 percent in 2008 to 26 percent in 2010. The primary barrier is budget constraints.”<sup>6</sup>

Exacerbating the crisis in recruiting and hiring efforts, in November, a Merit System Protect Board decision led OPM to essentially freeze most of the Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP), by far the largest route of entry into the federal civil service for recent graduates. With the FCIP frozen, the competitive USAJOBS online application system failing to bring in students in significant numbers [Appendix II], and the Presidential Management Fellowship program (PMF) placing only a few hundred highly-qualified graduates into the government, it is critical that we act now. Failing to replace the FCIP with a program open to both graduate and undergraduate students risks losing thousands of very well-qualified applicants.

Any special recruitment path for the nation’s future leaders **must** include pathways for graduate students. The regular USAJOBS path simply does not fit most graduate students, who typically are well trained and possess relevant and current skills, but who lack significant work experience. Moreover, these students rarely have the “inside” advantage of familiarity with government employment opportunities and the application process. Evidence submitted by career services directors at NASPAA schools [Appendix I] suggests that most incoming masters students in public policy and public administration have an average of less than 2 years full-time work experience—and less if only *relevant* experience is considered. And even though the training they receive makes them a good fit for many federal positions, recent masters graduates appear to be even less successful in USAJOBS competitions than those with only an undergraduate degree. This results, in part, from masters graduates being considered at the GS-9 level, where most of the promotion candidates have more years of work experience and/or government service.

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<sup>5</sup> “2010--11 Public Service Renewal Action Plan,” Clerk of the Privy Council, 17th Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada, <http://clerk.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?pageId=165>

<sup>6</sup> The Partnership for Public Service and Grant Thornton, “Closing the Gap: Seven Obstacles to a First Class Federal Workforce,” August 2010, p 5.#

Additional evidence submitted by NASPAA member career directors [Appendix II] suggests graduate students are having a harder time than ever negotiating the USAJOBS process, even in making the initial cuts. It is not atypical for interested and high-achieving graduate students to submit dozens of individual online applications for federal, and not to hear back from anyone—sometimes for months, often not ever. For a student, this feels like a torturous, repeated individual failure as he or she applies to one black hole after another on USAJOBS. But looking at the overall experience of students in the system provides a powerful collective statement that the way students have to compete for jobs in USAJOBS does not adequately recognize their skills and capabilities.

So, how do we get highly skilled graduate students into the federal government in significant numbers to help transform government into a responsive, effective, efficient force?

**We need a path into federal service that seeks out, recognizes, and prizes skills and that provides opportunities to build experience alongside those skills.**

Graduate students are not materially different than undergraduates in their career strategies: they want to try possible career pathways and gain structured experience early on in their job. There is no justification, based on empirical evidence or philosophical grounds, for splitting off graduate students from eligibility for student hiring programs. We need a positive and effective strategy to renew the American civil service and its ability to execute the obligations of government cost-effectively and capably. Relying on attrition to shrink the civil service without simultaneous supervisory (and high skill) recruitment is suicidal.

OPM forecasts show that the federal workforce retirement flow in the immediate years ahead will most seriously and quickly deplete the senior executive service and supervisory levels of the general schedule. Recent OPM data and projections make this point startlingly clear: within 2 years, 37%+ of supervisory management personnel in the civil service are eligible for retirement.<sup>7</sup> While current federal workers may be eligible to retire, they many chose not to do so in the next few years. However, with recent salary freezes and the recovering Thrift Savings Plan retirement balances, there is a growing probability that these conditions will hasten rather than slow down the expected retirement rates.

We should not be derailed from the promise of hiring reform to lift the civil service to a new level of cost-effectiveness and accountability. We need to look forward, and create (or at least refine) as many carefully targeted recruitment and internship programs as we need to bring highly capable, newly minted degree holders through the doors of government.

We need to find timely, rigorous, and open ways to bring graduate students into federal careers; if top students are dissuaded from pursuing a federal career, they will most certainly find promising employment elsewhere. Well-targeted excepted hiring programs are one proven way, and are now more essential than ever. Graduate student hiring programs, and the students whom they serve, are the path to achieving those goals. Make them welcome. The nation's future depends on it.

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<sup>7</sup> From the US Office of Personnel Management, "Retirement Projections and Eligibility For NSFTP Employees By Supervisory Status and Senior Executive Service- 2010 Through 2019," supplied December 2010.

## Appendix I: Age and Experience of Public Administration/Public Policy Masters Students

UNIVERSITY	SCHOOL / PROGRAM	% of students with <3 yrs prior work experience	% of students under age 25	Average Age
American U.	SPA			24
Auburn U.	MPA Prog.	100	85	
Brandeis U.	Heller		54	
Brown U.	Taubman		75	
Duke U.	Sanford			24-26
George Mason U.	Sch of Public Policy		30	
George Washington U.	Trachtenberg	68		
Indiana U., Bloomington	SPEA	86		
New York U.	Wagner	32		
Old Dominion U.	MPA Prog.		18	
Oregon State U.	MPA Prog.	94	38	
Pepperdine U.	MPP Prog.	63		
Syracuse U.	Maxwell		50*	
Texas A&M U.	Bush		71	
U. of Chicago	Harris	41	48	
U. of North Carolina Wilmington	MPA Prog.	58		
U of Washington	Evans	52 (<2 yrs)		
University of Nebraska Omaha			40**	
U. of Southern California	SPPD	40 (<2 yrs)		27
Willamette U	Atkinson	39 (<1 yr)	60	
C. of William and Mary	Jefferson	50	45	27
* median age is 25.				
** admits, and those 20-24				
Data were supplied by career directors and compiled by NASPAA, December 2010.				
Data are for the 2010 class, or the most recent year available.				

**APPENDIX II: GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE WITH USAJOBS**  
**Excerpts from Reports from NASPAA Schools' Career Services Directors**

Grad students have a hard time with direct applications through USAJobs. **In my 10 years here at the Harvard Kennedy School, I don't think I have ever heard of a student who applied blindly to a posting and got an interview.** There may have been a few, but I have not heard of them. Through the years, I have had many frustrated students come by who have submitted applications through posting and never, ever heard a word.

*Mary Beaulieu*  
*Assistant Dean and Director, Office of Career Advancement*  
*Harvard Kennedy School*

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Like many of my colleagues, I have a fair share of horror stories involving highly capable graduate students who either accepted private sector opportunities or were completely disenchanted with the federal competitive hiring process. **In fact, through eight years of service with Cornell's MPA program and scores of graduate students entering federal service through USAJOBS from our program on two hands.** Most, and the vast majority, have entered through FCIP, only because it is the federal hiring program that is most analogous with private sector hiring and is much more nimble in hiring than the competitive process (or PMF, for that matter). Denying students access to FCIP will severely impair capable students moving into federal service at a time when the government needs qualified professionals more than ever. This is especially true at institutions like Cornell, where students tend to be exposed at a very early stage in their graduate careers to a wealth of competing private sector alternatives.

*Thomas O'Toole*  
*Executive Director, Cornell Institute for Public Affairs*  
*Cornell University*

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[The absence of an FCIP-type hiring program for students] will deal an especially significant blow to the Maryland School of Public Policy masters students where we place an average of 50% of each graduating class in the public sector - with the lion's share at the federal level. The vast majority of these students have found successful entry into the federal government not through the PMF, but by taking advantage of FCIPs such as the DHS Honors Fellows Program, HHS Emerging Leaders Program and the EPA's Career Intern Program. **In all my years in this position, I've had one (1) student that has successfully navigated USAJOBS to land a position. I do not mean one student per year, but one student total.** USAJOBS is not a suitable alternative for pipelining talented public policy and international affairs students from Maryland or any other NASPAA graduate program. Our students will be left out in the cold – literally.

*C. Bryan Kempton, Director*  
*Office of Career Services and Alumni Relations*  
*University of Maryland School of Public Policy*

I received this today from a recent Duke Sanford School MPP:

"I applied for close to a dozen job posting through USAJobs without success. The application process was tedious and the response time was lengthy. I was uncertain whether I was being considered for a position or whether additional information would help my cause. When I did learn of several interviews, I had already accepted a position through the FCIP. The FCIP streamlined the job process, allowing for much-needed communication with human relations specialists and potential supervisors. I strongly support the FCIP and believe it is a critical on-boarding mechanism for future federal public servants."

*Donna Dyer*  
*Director of Career Services*  
*Sanford School of Public Policy*  
*Duke University*

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Here is a recent e-mail I received from a June 2010 WWS MPA graduates. He was one of our very best students.

"Unfortunately, the developments have been negative. I have applied for a job at the Bureau of Economic Analysis at the Dept of Commerce. I wish I had found out about that posting four months ago. I learned about it from a job fair I attended here in DC. Apparently the Economist position that I applied for is always open and applications are continuously accepted and considered all year.

And finally, the last and most promising prospect for me at this time...I have an interview scheduled with Booz Allen Hamilton for a position as a Cost Estimation Consultant for contractors with the Dept of Defense. One of my friends mentioned that BAH is going public and is trying to staff up on economics and statistics professionals. I prepared the resume and sent it on Sunday, and I received a confirmation on Monday that someone would be calling me. They called me on Tuesday to schedule a phone screening. I did the phone screening on Wednesday. They called me a couple of days ago to set up an interview on October 7th. I asked the phone screener what the normal timeline for receiving an offer and starting work AFTER the interview, she says it depends, but anywhere from 3 to 7 days. I could potentially be working for them on October 10th if everything goes well.

WHY IS IT SO MUCH EASIER TO GET HIRED BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR? I really tried. You know I did. I haven't given up hope on the public sector, but I am pretty damn close. I will let you know how things go." [NOTE: He did get an offer from Booz Allen and is working there now.]

*Ann D. Corwin*  
*Director of Graduate Career Services and Alumni Relations*  
*Woodrow Wilson School of Public & International Affairs*  
*Princeton University*

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In 2006, I became the director of career services for the Taubman Center for Public Policy's graduate program at Brown University. Prior to that period, I had worked helping students in business schools find jobs in the private sector. I was thrilled to take a position where students were more likely to be working for the 'common good'. Much to my dismay, I was horrified to find how difficult it was for very talented graduate students to find and apply for positions in federal government. In my efforts to help these students, I applied for and was awarded a grant through the Partnership for Public Service to gain training and resources to promote federal service for our students. Students' interest increased tremendously but their frustration with USAJOBS and the 'black hole' of online federal application processing left most of them opting out of federal positions. The process is cumbersome and very time consuming, much more so than other applications. Additionally, students want to follow up on the status of their applications but are unable to get a response.

Brown's program is fairly new (2006) and small (about 20 students graduate with MPP and MPA's per year). We've already been able to be awarded 3 PMF's out of our small group and for that I am very proud. I only wish there were an easier way to get this top talent into federal service. Eighty-five percent of our students strongly desire to work for the federal government, but about 20 percent find themselves employed there, and that is because those agencies take time to recruit on our campus. The federal government is missing out on top talent.

*Jennifer Slattery-Bownds  
Director of Graduate Study  
Assistant Director, Professional Programs  
Taubman Center for Public Policy & American Institutions  
Brown University*

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I should reiterate my statement that so far as I know, **not one of my students who got federal jobs in the last 3 years got them through the competitive service.** Each one was an FCIP or special fellowship. FCIP is an extremely important way for our students to get federal jobs, and to close off the eligibility for grad students would be extraordinarily short-sighted of the federal government. To bar students who have a commitment to public service as well as the required training needed by the federal government would be just insane.

*Heather Krasna  
Director of Career Services, Evans School of Public Affairs  
University of Washington*

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Since 2006, I am fairly certain that at least 14 agencies, including CDC, Treasury, EPA, Social Security Administration, etc., have used FCIP authorization to hire numerous Ford School Master of Public Policy students. Most of these students were hired at a GS-9 level given their limited work experience prior to attending the Ford School. **Many of these students also applied for competitive service positions through USAJobs; however, to the best of my knowledge, none of those students were contacted for interviews.**

To my knowledge, **only ONE Ford School student has been hired into the federal government through the competitive process in the past five years** (except OMB). This student came to the Ford School with eight years experience working as a chemist in the pharmaceutical industry. He was hired by the Food & Drug Administration at a GS-15 level. This is not the typical level of experience of our MPP students. Our incoming class has an average of 2 years of work experience, often unrelated or loosely related to the field they are now choosing to enter.

It is extremely important to note that, to the best of my knowledge, **almost ALL of the students hired into the federal government through the programs mentioned above remain employed by the federal government today.** The FCIP authorization is a critical point of access for the graduate students who will one day lead federal agencies. Without graduate student inclusion into a revised FCIP program, our students' hiring experience with the competitive process indicates that upon graduation from the Ford School, our Master of Public Policy graduates would face significant challenges securing federal employment – the very career path for which many came to graduate school.

*Jennifer Niggemeier, Director  
Graduate Career Services  
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy  
University of Michigan*

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Two of my students recently told me that they scored 96 and 98 respectively, out of 100, on two GS-9 positions in the federal government but were not offered an interview. Also, several other students have mentioned to me that they have applied for more than 20-30 positions in the federal government through USAJOBS in the last 6-9 months, and have heard back from only a few about their status in the process. **As for the number [of Trachtenberg School students] who have landed positions through the competitive hiring process, I seriously can only think of one over the last five years.**

*Paul Binkley, Director  
Career Development Services  
Trachtenberg School of Public Policy  
and Public Administration  
The George Washington University*