



National Association of Schools  
of Public Affairs and Administration

## **Blazing Graduate Pathways into Federal Service: A NASPAA White Paper<sup>1</sup>**

Written by  
Laurel McFarland  
NASPAA Executive Director

Every functioning, sustainable system has to renew itself. And to thrive, the system needs vigorous injections of energy and innovation. In federal hiring, we are now failing to do that.

We are putting at risk the future of the civil service, and hence the government's ability to deliver on its promises to citizens. The competitive hiring system is collapsing under waves of applications, antiquated selection and processing mechanisms, while at the same time it is facing waves of imminent retirements.

Students represent a particularly poignant casualty of the breakdown in the functioning of the competitive hiring system. They are the skills and promise of the future. They have the highest interest in federal service of any recent generation, but lacking the organizational identity and direct access to policymakers of other participants in the federal hiring process, they have simply failed, individual by individual, to scale the federal hiring selection mechanisms. The result is striking: students are not coming into the civil service in sufficient numbers to replace retirees, and only about 25% of students hired into federal service are coming in through competitive hiring.

---

<sup>1</sup> This Discussion Paper was written December 2009, and I would like to thank the NASPAA Policy Issues Committee, Scott Talan, Paul Binkley, and Jody Brightman for comments on earlier drafts. We would also like to thank Greg Lewis at Georgia State for data, and James Tsugawa at Merit Systems Protection Board for data advice. This paper represent my views alone, and do not represent any positions of MSPB, OPM, or any other government agency. NASPAA is the association of 275 graduate programs in public administration, affairs & policy across the country.

If that trend reflected a model that allowed students to “try on” federal employment, get some specialized training, and ultimately, to be evaluated on a probationary basis, it would be a good thing. But the current excepted hiring lacks any coherence or strategic intent. And the way that internships are currently advertised and made available is anything but transparent, merit-based, or competitive. A whole generation of American is learning that the way to get a federal job is on a who-you-know basis. And make no mistake: many students, confronting the complexity and unfairness of this process, will simply give up. These publicly spirited students will take their talents elsewhere.

## **A New Pathway for Graduate Students**

We propose a radical solution. End competitive hiring for most students, and particularly graduate students. But make the excepted hiring<sup>2</sup> for students an intentional, strategic plan. Link it to agencies’ specific human capital plans and skill needs assessments. Make it an *apprenticeship* model as OPM Director John Berry has suggested,<sup>3</sup> with a probationary try-on period and on-going training. End the Federal Career Internship Program (FCIP), an unfocused, mushrooming program that has damaged perceptions of internship programs in the government. Replace it with an internship program focused just on students. Terminate the other disjointed, diffuse internships scattered across government. Create a well-advertised, transparent federal student internship program that offers opportunities while in college and graduate school, summers between terms, and then two year full-time probationary positions immediately after graduation. The program should provide repeated opportunities for students to experience a variety of career-oriented project assignments that will encourage them to take the courses they need to prepare for future career opportunities in federal service. In this apprenticeship-type model, internships should be designed not just to replace existing positions, but to transform government by attracting the skilled people we need and the opportunities to tailor their training to the cutting-edge needs of government.

## **Two Models**

There are at least two possible approaches to building a graduate pathway into federal service. Both involve using the well-established Presidential Management Fellowship as a starting point.

1. Call the first the “**PMF Flagship.**” In this model, there are two main internship programs for graduate students: a separate PMF program just for graduate students, and a

---

<sup>2</sup> Excepted hiring is federal hiring that does not go through the competitive process. For definitions and all the categories of “excepted” hiring, see [www.opm.gov/strategic\\_management\\_of\\_human\\_capital/fhfr/FLX05030.asp](http://www.opm.gov/strategic_management_of_human_capital/fhfr/FLX05030.asp)

<sup>3</sup> From remarks of OPM Director John Berry, Human Capital Management Forum, Marriott Key Bridge, November 17, 2009, [http://www.opm.gov/About\\_OPM/director/remarks/11-19-09-HR\\_CapitalMgtForum.asp](http://www.opm.gov/About_OPM/director/remarks/11-19-09-HR_CapitalMgtForum.asp)

graduate student component of the comprehensive federal internship program for all students. Retain the PMF as a small and prestigious “flagship” (perhaps 300-400 graduate students per year), with significant publicity and outreach to build wide student interest in “serving the president and the nation,” but move all the annual application and placement dates earlier in the academic year, so that offers are made to finalists in mid-winter. Make the PMF the first internship level to “clear,” so that both successful and unsuccessful candidates know where they are. Then, crucially, inform the latter about additional graduate internship opportunities found in the main federal internship program. In that program, individual agencies create term-time and summer internships based on their own strategic human capital planning, and students are encouraged to build a portfolio of different federal (and local, state, nonprofit, and volunteer) internships during their college and graduate school years and summers. Though the agencies create the internship positions and their requirements, they need to list all of them on a central information clearinghouse, perhaps through OPM, so that the information can be widely available to students across the country. At the same time, students can create a permanent electronic portfolio on the site that captures their internships (and skills attained) and they can add to it over time. That portfolio can become part of their application for future federal positions. The same website can, with students’ permission, then generate email alerts to them when internships of interest are posted.

2. The second model spins off graduate internships into their own distinct pathway, by building on the Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF) model. Expand the size of the PMF to meet the desired size of an annual graduate “class” for federal service, perhaps 2000 or so positions each year. (See the discussion below of “scope and scale.”) Divide the PMF program into coherent tracks that reflect the future skill requirements of the federal government, based on the government’s own workforce planning, and make the PMF the *primary* vehicle for grad students. Make it strategic: connect the PMF to agencies' strategic thinking and their strategic planning about what we want government to be able to do in future. Graduate students will get you there. Agencies have been reluctant to articulate and defend their talent needs. They know, and we know, workers with graduate degrees can do things that those without advanced skills can’t. Internships are one place where agencies need to loudly broadcast their future talent needs, and target those needs with their position announcements. A fair hiring process is one that is free from favoritism or bias, but it is not free from recognizing the existence of differential skill requirements, and the fundamental fact that graduate students are high “value-added” to the government workforce. The hiring process for graduate students needs to assess the competencies required to do high level, demanding work for the government. It should use a variety of assessment mechanisms, not just a multiple choice test, but also online video group

interviews and simulations, to assure that all graduate students, from all backgrounds, and no matter their amount of previous work experience, can demonstrate their knowledge and competency to do the job.

PMF Tracks:

- *A Management and Leadership Track*

Why not devote one of the PMF tracks to attracting top-notch *management* skills to government? Graduate management students represent a critical element in this capacity building in government. They bring the management capability and leadership skills to the table to deal with all the new organizations challenges faced by the government: dealing with networks, contracted out services, procurement reform, and “performance management” expectations.

- *A Professional and Policy Track*

And why not another track that targets those with analytic skills? With all the demands for “evidence-based” policy and with the rising demand for expertise in financial market oversight, regulation, and other areas requiring analytic skills from economics, law, and public policy training.

- *A Science, IT, and Technical Track*

The successive waves of health, environmental science, and transportation safety policy issues facing government emphasize the need to bring not just PhD-level research scientists, but also master’s-level scientists, such as graduates of Professional Science Master's programs, into government.<sup>4</sup> These graduates are specifically trained to leverage their expertise by gaining additional workplace skills in areas such as communications and regulatory affairs. Some agencies have already been using the PMF to recruit students with these skills and background, but few students are aware of this, and there has been no strategic or intentional effort to connect a “management internship” program and subject knowledge in the sciences and technical fields. We need these students, who can seamlessly bridge science and government, and the PMF program would only benefit from increased attention and marketing of this aspect.

-----

Elsewhere, NASPAA has outlined many of the specific mechanisms to revitalize the PMF program, particularly from the student perspective, to make it competitive with other opportunities that successful graduate students can consider.<sup>5</sup> It must also be considered as part of the larger effort to connect agencies’ human capital planning with federal recruiting and hiring of students.

---

<sup>4</sup> See descriptions of these programs at <http://www.sciencemasters.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> See “Reinventing the PMF” at <http://www.naspaa.org/initiatives/Published%20Conference%20Summary.pdf>

The two models discussed above show that the Presidential Management Fellowship needs to change to adapt to the changing needs of government, and to possible hiring reforms. For more than thirty years, the flagship of federal hiring of graduate students has been the PMF.

The PMF is a paradox. It is small, beloved, awash in more applications than ever before... and troubled. It has become an example of much of what is right with idealistic, highly skilled young people and wrong with federal hiring. Though it brings in only about 400 former graduate students a year into government, those leagues of newly trained professionals have been extraordinarily important to the functioning and renewal of the civil service. Many PMF alumni have gone on to distinguished careers in federal and public service. There is almost universal agreement across government, and across the policy spectrum that the PMF works, despite all of its recent challenges. It works because it values the unique brand of advanced skills and public service commitment that PMFs have brought to the table.

However, in recent years, the PMF's fearsome reputation as an arbiter of the "right stuff" for federal service, has become shaky. The selection process has been stripped of its high-powered group interview process and its legendary, substantive examination. And while applications have gone up, surveys have shown graduate students increasingly disaffected by the process, and expressing concern that the selection process is unpredictable, opaque, and prone to dead ends for finalists who don't match any posted positions. We believe the program can make a more significant contribution to retooling the skills mix of the civil service if a few key changes are made to recruitment, selection, and matching. These are needed *operational* changes. But from a *strategic* perspective, we have to get the scope and scale right: the PMF, currently the main excepted hiring program limited only to graduate students, is just too small to do the job.

### **The Scope and Scale of the Graduate Pipeline**

One of the first steps in revamping graduate hiring pathways is to get the scope and scale right. If an apprentice-like internship program is to largely replace competitive hiring of graduate students, it is important to know what the volume of that hiring is, and should be. Then the scale of the program can be established that provides a useful flow of graduate students into the system. The composition of the "graduate pipeline" is not well-known. But estimates and generalizations can be made based on available data.

A good place to start is the GS-9 level: that is the port of entry for most graduate students, especially those without much professional work experience. Over the years, the GS-9 has

consistently provided about 15% of entry-level new hires.<sup>6</sup> The Partnership for Public Service found in 2004 that while *total* GS-9 hiring exceeded 25,000, the federal government hired less than 5,000 GS-9s competitively from “outside,” including experienced workers (most without graduate degrees if they come in as a GS-9), veterans, and recent students (including those converting into GS-9s from internships and excepted hiring programs).<sup>7</sup> Fedscope data confirm this level of 5,000 or so new competitive hires at the GS-9 level for recent years up to FY2008. It also shows the rising numbers of new GS-9 hires coming in through *excepted* hiring: in FY2008 for example, about 6400 new GS-9s came in through excepted hiring. These levels can also be seen in Merit Systems Protection Board data.<sup>8</sup>

Using MSPB survey data that shows about 15% of competitive hires and 29% of excepted hires were coming from school,<sup>9</sup> we can estimate that about 700 *competitive* GS-9 hires per year have been coming from graduate school, and rising numbers—above 1900 most recently, are grad students hired through *excepted* channels. Putting very rough bands around these estimates, these data sources all point roughly in the same direction: 2500-3000 graduate students per year coming into federal service as GS-9s.

Using an alternative methodology-- a 1% sample of federal personnel records-- over half the people hired into GS-9 professional/administrative positions receive promotions from GS-7 positions, and three-quarters of them are probably receiving noncompetitive promotions (they are not changing occupations). About 45% of external hires into GS-9 professional/administrative positions have master's degrees. Of those, 2/3 had earned their degrees in the year or two before they started their federal jobs. So that further narrows the pipeline: it looks like somewhere around 1500 people with newly minted graduate degrees came into government each year at the GS-9 level in *administrative* and *professional* categories. It appears a significant percentage of them are PMFs and FCIPs.<sup>10</sup>

These data sources confirm the anecdotal evidence that graduate students are seriously under-represented in competitive hiring, and that the PMF, as small as it is, remains a vital, but undersized, source of graduate manpower. The data suggest that a graduate student internship program, based on either a flagship or multi-track PMF model, could grow to at least 1500-2000 students per year. That would provide about the level of “flow” of graduate talent

---

<sup>6</sup> “Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires,”; A Report to the President and the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, January 2008, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Partnership for Public Service, “Mid-Career Hiring: Revisiting the Search for Seasoned Talent in the Federal Government,” A Report in the Federal Hiring Series, September 2004, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> James Tsugawa, Merit Systems Protection Board, “NASPAA MPA Opportunities in Government” presentation, Federal Hiring Panel, NASPAA Conference, October 2009, Crystal City Virginia, <http://naspaa2009conference.wikispaces.com/15th+Thursday>.

<sup>9</sup> “Attracting the Next Generation...” p 20, Table 4. Data are specific to FY05.

<sup>10</sup> Data on PMFs is from “A Snapshot of the Graduate Pipeline into Federal Service: an Application of the 1% Sample”, NASPAA Working Paper, Greg Lewis and Laurel McFarland, December 2009; data on FCIPs is from MSPB, “Attracting the Next Generation...” p 12.

that the system needs to invigorate the federal service and provide it with the cutting edge skills we need. (That, of course, is based on two key policy assumptions, subject to change: that overall federal hiring at the GS-9 level will not increase significantly in future years, and that the volume in the graduate student pipeline should not displace the volume of parallel pipelines of incumbent workers, experienced external workers without graduate degrees, and veterans).

## **The Challenge**

By constricting the flow of grad students into federal service, especially through competitive hiring channels, we have put the country at risk of atrophying the whole federal workforce. There are many historical and political explanations for why it has happened. Students present some knotty challenges to a merit system. They lack work experience. They don't know exactly what they want to do in their careers, and some don't "stick." They don't know how to navigate the federal government. The historical approach was to look for their capacity, through testing and interviewing processes. For important reasons we largely abandoned that: concerns with fairness, diversity, and cost.

The small trickle of graduate students coming in through competitive hiring masks the tidal wave of student applicants who apply for federal jobs through USAJobs, and rank so low in the scoring that they never hear another word back, and thus end up discouraged and disaffected from federal employment. They turn to other sectors and don't look back. We are losing a generation of young people who have come to believe the government does not want them or value them.

But the bottom line remains: we are failing, and dismally so, to attract and hire the number of capable graduate students we need, to transform the government, or even just to enable it to deal with the slew of challenges that will confront this next generation. We need to address this tension directly. There is a pipeline of talent into federal service, and up through the ranks of the civil service. The primary streams of human resources into the pipeline are current federal workers, graduating students, experienced workers moving into government from other sectors, and veterans. All of these streams are needed, and given the retirement profile of the civil service, and the rising tide of needed skills and expertise in government, they are not in competition with each other. But in popular reports, they are often portrayed that way.

Here is the bottom line: we can promote people within about as fast as we can. We can keep bringing in new hires from external sources, both students and experienced workers, at the pace we have been doing. And we can continue to reach out to veterans, using some of the new authorities bestowed by the Nov. 6, 2009 Executive Order. However, even if we do all this, we still will not replace the retiring workers and develop the high-skill civil service we need for the next generation.

**Pathways for graduate students into federal service are an obvious and urgent priority for strategic human capital planning at the agency level, and at the central government level.**

NASPAA's vision for a student-savvy Presidential Management Fellowship program is a key element of that planning. The federal government will get a wider talent pipeline, and a generation of enthusiastic, highly skilled graduate students can make a difference to their government and their country.