

# College Students Are Attracted to Federal Service, but Agencies Need to Capitalize on Their Interest

Employees younger than 30 represent just 8.5 percent of the federal workforce, compared with 23.2 percent of the U.S. workforce overall.<sup>1</sup> Federal agencies must attract, hire and retain top talent from colleges and universities to combat this significant lack of generational diversity and ensure that the federal workforce is well positioned to tackle our country's most pressing challenges now and in the future.

To compete with the private and nonprofit sectors for the brightest students, federal managers and recruiters need a nuanced understanding of college students' interest in, and perceptions of, federal employment as well as their professional expectations and preferences as they begin their careers.

The Partnership for Public Service analyzed the results of the 2013 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Student Survey, which asked students about their employment plans, including their immediate plans after graduation, their ideal career, salary expectations and what they consider the most important attributes for their first job. NACE surveyed 37,874 students from 646 colleges and universities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The results reveal a complex picture, indicating that while many college students are attracted to government service, federal agencies need to address some challenges to better draw top graduates.

<sup>1</sup> Federal workforce distribution from FedScope (<http://fedscope.opm.gov>) from the Office of Personnel Management (Sept. 2013). Overall U.S. workforce distribution from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Sept. 2013, employment level by age.



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## HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS VIEW FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT

While young people clearly are underrepresented in the federal workforce, analysis of NACE's survey results revealed that many college students, in fact, are attracted to government service. One-quarter (24.9 percent) of respondents ranked government (federal, state and local) as one of their top three target industries. Although this number was down from 29.8 percent in 2012, it still placed government 5th among the 19 industries that students ranked. Among graduating seniors, government was the highest-ranked industry.

While only 2 percent of the students surveyed planned to enter federal service after graduation, 5.7 percent listed federal service as their ideal career. Although many more students cited private and nonprofit work as their ideal careers, it is important to note that these larger sectors also provide much higher percentages of the nation's jobs and, therefore, naturally attract higher numbers of new graduates each year.

A strong attraction to federal government service was particularly apparent among former federal interns. Our analysis found these interns were more interested in federal employment than in any other sector, with 21.2 percent listing the federal government as their ideal employer. However, only 12 percent of them planned to work for the federal government after graduation. Another 30 percent planned to continue their education, and 18.6 percent planned to work for the private sector.

Federal interns reported having fairly positive internship experiences; 46.2 percent said they likely or certainly would accept a full-time position with the organization in which they interned (compared with 44.8 percent of all interns). However, only 19.5 percent reported receiving a job offer from that agency (compared with 27.3 percent of private-sector

interns). This finding supports previous research by the Partnership, which revealed that the federal government lags far behind the private sector in converting high-quality interns into permanent employees.<sup>2</sup>

The percentages of students who listed the federal government as their ideal career varied significantly among fields of study. Students majoring in political science or history, environmental science and foreign language were the most likely to have a strong interest in federal employment. Students majoring in education, visual and performing arts, health care<sup>3</sup>, English and business were least likely to list the federal government as their ideal career.

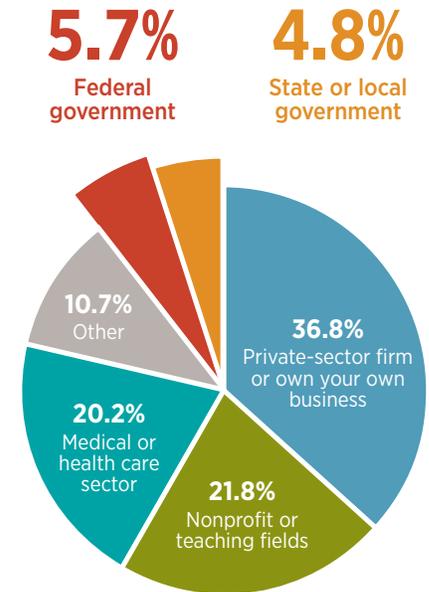
Our analysis also found college students underutilized USAJOBS.gov, the federal government's online portal to search and apply for jobs. Only 8.8 percent of students reported job searching on USAJOBS, compared with the percentages of students who visited other leading sites such as LinkedIn (17.3 percent), Career Builder (15.5 percent) and Monster (14.5 percent).

Perhaps most striking is that 35.1 percent of respondents who listed the federal government as their ideal career and had actively begun their job search had not searched for positions on USAJOBS. This finding may suggest a lack of understanding about the federal job application process among college students or may indicate that students believe they are unlikely to land a federal job.

<sup>2</sup> *Leaving Talent on the Table: The Need to Capitalize on High-Performing Student Interns*, Partnership for Public Service, April 2009.

<sup>3</sup> This finding does not necessarily indicate a true lack of interest in federal employment among health care majors. The NACE survey lists the medical or health-care sector as a career option in this question, and most health care majors selected this option.

### Which of the following represents your ideal career?



### Majors most likely to list the federal government as their ideal career

-  Political Science or History **26.8%**
-  Environmental Science **14.5%**
-  Foreign Language **13.7%**

### Majors least likely to list the federal government as their ideal career

-  Business **3.4%**
-  English **1.9%**
-  Health Care **1.4%**
-  Visual and Performing Arts **1.3%**
-  Education **1.0%**

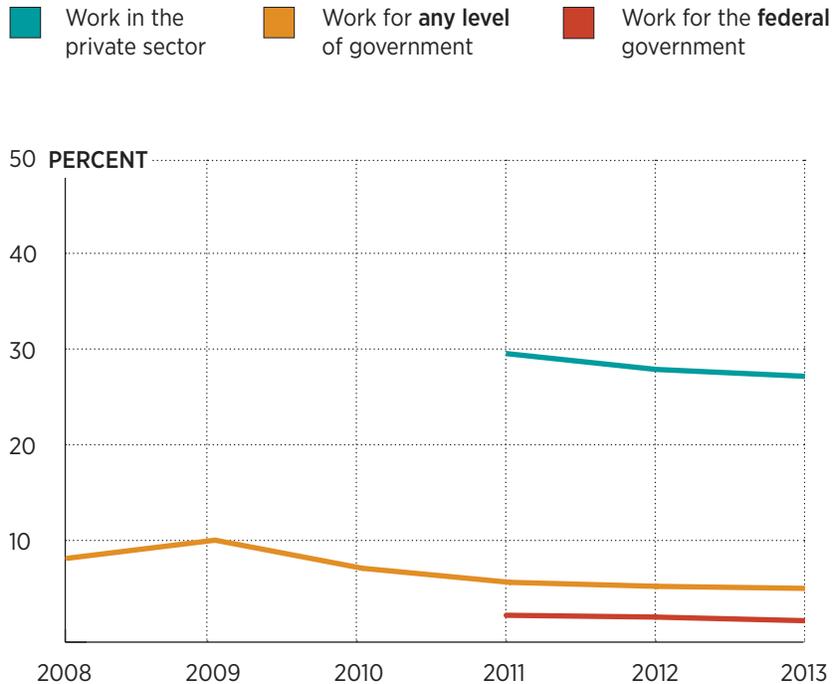
## WHAT STUDENTS PLAN TO DO AFTER GRADUATION

The NACE survey finds that 2 percent of students plan to enter the federal government after graduation, while 29.3 percent intend to pursue another degree full time; 27.3 percent anticipate working in the private sector or starting their own business; and 17.3 percent plan to work in the nonprofit or teaching fields. The rest are eyeing other options (e.g., entering the military) or are unsure of their plans.

Although 2 percent may seem like a low percentage of college students planning to join the federal government, the U.S. federal civilian workforce is much smaller than the private and nonprofit sectors and fewer jobs are available.

The percentage of college students planning to enter government at any level declined for the fifth consecutive year, sliding from 10.2 percent in 2009 to 5.4 percent in 2013. This decline may be the result of several factors. For example, federal agencies, as well as many state and local governments, have drastically reduced hiring over the past several years, limiting the opportunities for young people to join government service.

### Immediately after graduation I plan to:



## WHAT STUDENTS WANT FROM THEIR FIRST JOB

The NACE survey asked students to rate 16 job attributes in terms of their importance in choosing among potential employers. Opportunity for personal growth and development topped the list, followed by job security, friendly co-workers and a good insurance and benefits package. Perhaps surprisingly, a high starting salary ranked only 11th out of 16 attributes. The lowest ranked attributes were: having a casual atmosphere; the organization's brand or name recognition; and an organization's status as a green company.

Students also stressed the importance of recognition for good performance, with 75.3 percent agreeing

that it is critical when considering potential employers. This finding highlights a challenge that federal agencies must address in order to compete with the private sector for top talent. Previous research by the Partnership has identified that the federal government lags far behind the private sector in terms of employee satisfaction with the recognition they receive for good performance.<sup>4</sup>

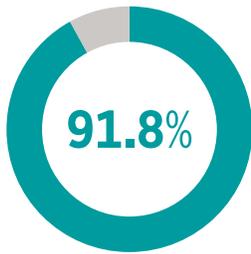
When evaluating employers, students listed the most important benefits to be employer-paid medical in-

surance, the promise of annual salary increases, tuition reimbursement for advanced education and an employer match for retirement plan contributions.

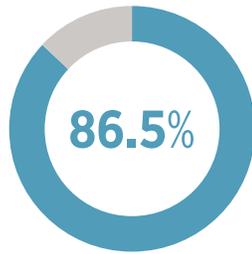
The majority of students surveyed (55.9 percent) expected an annual starting salary of more than \$40,000 for their first job, while 25.4 percent expected to make more than \$55,000. As new federal employees in the Washington, D.C. area, students with undergraduate degrees generally can anticipate earning between \$32,415 and \$42,631, highlighting the continued challenges agencies face in meeting new talent's salary expectations.

<sup>4</sup> Partnership for Public Service analysis of the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2013. (<http://bit.ly/1lx87QP>).

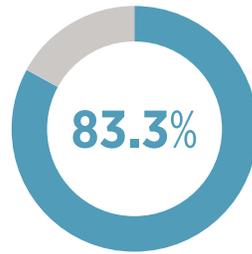
Percentage of students who characterized the job attribute as extremely or very important



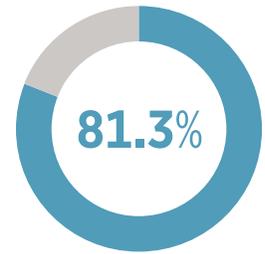
Organization offers the opportunity for personal growth and development



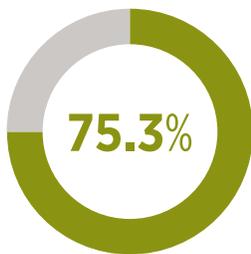
Organization offers job security



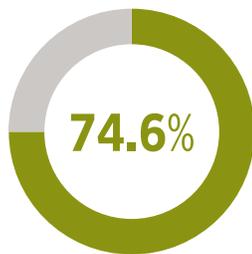
There are friendly co-workers



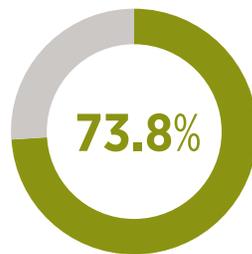
Organization has a good insurance and benefits package



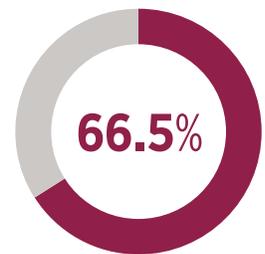
There is recognition for good performance



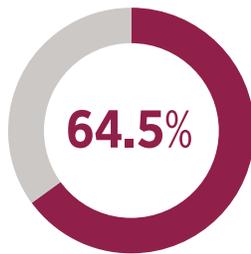
There are clearly defined assignments



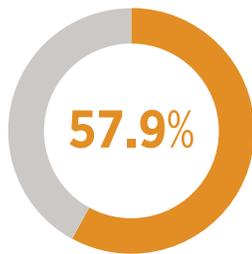
Organization provides me the ability to improve my community, country or world



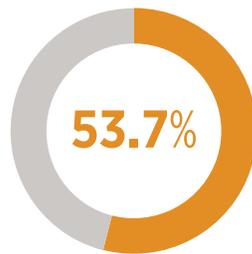
Organization offers the opportunity for self-expression and creativity



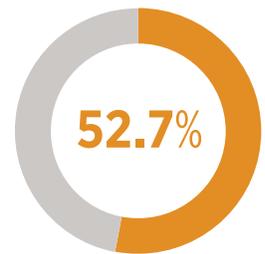
Organization embraces diversity



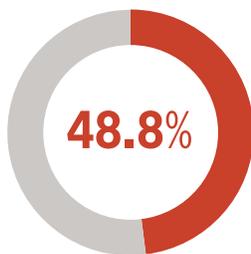
Organization provides the opportunity for rapid advancement



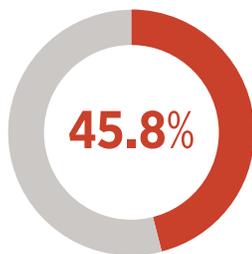
Organization offers a high starting salary



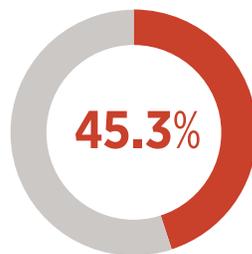
Organization is located in a diverse and tolerant community



Organization is located close to my home



Casual atmosphere (noncompetitive environment)



Organization has a well-recognized name, brand or image



Organization is known as a green company

## STUDENTS MAJORING IN STEM DISCIPLINES

Analysis of the NACE survey data revealed challenges, but also some encouraging findings, for agencies seeking to recruit students in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

The data suggest that agencies will continue to struggle to meet salary expectations for STEM talent. Students majoring in STEM fields anticipated commanding significantly higher salaries than their peers after graduation. Nearly 46 percent of STEM majors expected to earn more than \$55,000 annually, compared with 25.4 percent among all majors. As previously noted, starting salaries in the federal government for students with undergraduate degrees are well below this mark.

More encouraging, however, is that STEM students were about as likely to be attracted to or planning on joining the federal government as non-STEM students—5.8 percent of STEM majors listed federal service as their ideal career, compared with 5.7 percent of all majors.

Additionally, 10.1 percent of STEM majors reported searching for a position on USAJOBS.gov, which was slightly higher than the percentage of all majors that had done so (8.8 percent).

When asked about their ideal career, working for a private-sector firm (33.9 percent) and working in the medical or health-care sector (25.2 percent) were the most popular choices for STEM students.

Interest in federal employment ranged widely among majors in different STEM disciplines. Nearly 15 percent of students studying environmental science and 9.4 percent of students studying computer or information science listed the federal government as their idea career, compared with 5.4 percent of engineering majors and 3.2 percent of biology majors.

STEM majors placed a higher emphasis on starting salary and were slightly less concerned about a strong benefits and insurance package than non-STEM majors. STEM majors also valued more highly whether an organization was known as a green company (although this factor still did not rank high on their list).

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this research suggest that despite federal agencies' lackluster performance in incorporating millennials into their workforce, many college students still are attracted to government service.

Federal agencies need to address the lack of generational diversity in their workforce as a serious problem. To deal with this challenge, federal human resources professionals and hiring managers should consider a variety of strategies to attract, hire and retain top college graduates.

### **Strengthen understanding of the federal job application process among college students, help them navigate the process and ensure that top candidates receive thorough consideration.**

Analysis of the NACE data revealed that more than one-third (35.1 percent) of students who listed the federal government as their ideal employer and had actively begun their job search had not searched for positions on USAJOBS.gov, the government's official jobs website. This finding may suggest that many college students who are interested in federal service lack a basic understanding of how to find and apply for federal jobs. Students may also be discouraged from applying for federal positions if they feel their application is unlikely to receive thorough consideration. This finding demonstrates that federal recruiters need to go beyond simply spurring interest among top college students; they must actively engage recruits and help them navigate the application process.

### **Hone recruitment efforts to highlight the job attributes and benefits that students most desire.**

Recruiters should stress to students the opportunity for personal growth and development since students ranked this as the most important job attribute. Federal agencies will also need to deliver on these promises once they get new recruits through the door. Additionally, job security and good insurance and benefits packages ranked high on students' priority lists—areas where federal agencies often have an edge over the private sector.

### **Use student internships and volunteer opportunities to maintain interest in federal employment, evaluate talent and build a workforce pipeline, even if agencies are not currently hiring.**

Highly-qualified, desirable students may be interested in federal jobs but with low hiring levels, agencies are unable to convert that interest into permanent

positions. In this environment, federal agencies can use student internships and volunteer opportunities to maintain interest, evaluate talent and build a pipeline of promising students who can be considered for permanent positions, now and in the future.

**Foster a workplace culture that is attractive to the next generation of employees and will retain new hires.**

College students value opportunities for growth and development when evaluating potential employers. Unfortunately, research by the Partnership has identified that federal employees are less likely than their private-sector peers to feel they have a real opportunity to improve their job skills.<sup>5</sup> The federal government also trails far behind the private sector in terms of employee satisfaction with recognition for good performance, another job attribute highly desired by today's college students. Federal agencies will need to close these gaps in employee satisfaction to create workplace cultures that can compete with the private sector for top college graduates and retain them after they arrive.

**Use the mission and opportunities for growth to attract STEM talent.**

Although STEM majors value starting salary more than non-STEM majors, salary is not at the top of their list when considering an employer. Many federal agencies generate interest among STEM students by emphasizing the opportunity to work on unique, cutting-edge or high-profile projects that may not be available in the private sector.

**NACE SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

From February 15th to April 30th, 2013, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) conducted an online survey among a sample of 37,874 college students (freshman through Ph.D. level) from 646 colleges and universities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia who reported themselves as U.S. citizens. The survey examines college student recruitment, students' plans and expectations after graduation, desirable employee attributes and benefits, as well as full demographics.

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<sup>5</sup> Partnership for Public Service analysis of the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2013. (<http://bit.ly/1lx87QP>).