

Beyond Academia:

Finding Meaningful Work with the Federal Government

An advanced or professional degree does not sentence you to a life in academia. Right now, the federal government is experiencing a dire need for workers thanks to a large amount of employees becoming eligible for retirement in the next few years and not enough young workers to take their places. No matter what your graduate degree is in, the federal government probably has an opening for you—it's just a matter of finding it.

Choosing the Right Agency

With hundreds of different agencies and subagencies, finding the right one could be the biggest challenge you'll face while looking for federal work. The Partnership for Public Service's Web site, makingthedifference.org, can help you simplify the search process. Otherwise, take a look at your individual interests, values and skills. On usajobs.gov, the federal government's official job site, click on the "Info Center" tab and then on "Career Interest Center" on the lower left. This will lead you to some tools that will match your skills and interests to job fields or types of federal positions. Talk to people from various agencies and see if their experiences interest you. Geography is a key consideration in your agency search. For example, in south Georgia, most of the available opportunities will be with Department of Agriculture agencies, but in Atlanta, you'll find regional offices for most federal agencies.

In addition to the Partnership for Public Service, job postings can be found at the Web sites of the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, as well as govexec.com, federaltimes.com, and of course, individual agencies' Web sites. *The Red, White and Blue Jobs Directory*, available at makingthedifference.org, is a helpful primer on how to get federal jobs, typical starting salaries, and the percentage of federal jobs in different areas of the country.

Of course, in your government job search, the most important URL to know is studentjobs.gov. Search by geography and appropriate pay grade, which will probably be 9-11 (see below.) Note: don't get too bogged down by the salary range. Those can change at any time depending upon when the agency's annual budget gets approved.

Aside from the job listings and application instructions, links to almost every agency with student employment opportunities can be found by clicking on the "Agency Info" tab at the top of the page.

Student Programs

These programs are specifically designed for students to find part-time or seasonal work or for recent graduates to get their foot in the door of government employment. Recent studies suggest that about two-thirds of student federal hires get hired through a student program. They're often not just your ticket to getting hired; they're your ticket to getting hired quickly, which is rare in the public sector. Not every agency will participate in all these programs; it's important to figure out first which agency you're interested in and then available research opportunities within that agency. On studentjobs.gov, at the bottom of the job listing, it usually has a contact person for you to get in touch with to ask about student programs.

1. Student Temporary Employment (STEP)

This is a part-time job for any level of student, usually over summer or winter break. It does not often lead to a full-time position.

2. Student Career Experience (SCEP)

A student in this program is required to complete 640 hours of work, which can take place over the summer, winter, breaks from school, or whenever the student has free time. Eventually, you'll be converted to full-time employment. These positions can be hard to come by, however, and you probably won't find any that are located in Athens.

3. Federal Career Internship Program (FCIP)

"Internship" probably isn't the best designation for this program, since it really refers to a paid, full-time appointment of two to three years. Afterwards, you'll be eligible for permanent placement. For this program, you'll have to contact the specific agency directly to find openings—they're more common at the agencies that struggle getting mission critical positions filled. Again, the ideal order is to target the agency that would be the best fit for you and then find out what programs or opportunities they offer.

4. Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF)

This program is very similar to FCIP, but is run through the President's office and is generally considered to be more prestigious. There's an involved application process, wherein graduate students who have demonstrated an interest in public service are nominated by departmental faculty. After a written assessment exam, interviews, and submitting an application, finalists are selected and have the opportunity to compete for agency jobs. The Career Center and www.pmf.opm.gov have more information.

Understanding the Process

Some veterans receive extra weight on their applications if they served during specific times of conflict. This is called veteran's preference, so be sure to indicate this on your application if it applies to you. The General Schedule is a 15-grade ranking of how skilled the positions are: a job with a grade of 9 usually requires a master's degree; an 11 is a Ph.D. or a professional degree. There are also steps within each grade that reflect your increase of skill on the job, and of course, after certain periods of time you're eligible to apply for positions of a higher grade. However, some agencies are now abandoning the General Schedule for a payband system.

Application Materials

The Federal Résumé

Your résumé for applying to federal jobs will look a little different from your normal résumé. For one thing, you don't have to stick to a single page. The average federal résumé is two to three pages and can be more for applicants with advanced degrees and experience. You'll have to include the position title and grade of the position you're applying for, as well as your social security number (which should be added in only when you're ready to submit, to maintain security.) A section on your experience should read like a CV: include major papers you've written, theses, and projects you've worked on. The key to a good federal résumé is to be as specific as possible when describing your experience. Try to use the same language from the job vacancy announcement, since employers might perform a keyword search to find applicants with the exact experience they're looking for. If you need help or just want some feedback, the UGA Career Center offers frequent résumé critiquing sessions.

KSAs

The cause of possibly the most confusion of the entire federal application process, KSAs shouldn't intimidate you from applying to a position you're interested in. They stand for Knowledge, Skills and Abilities and are just an opportunity for you to explain your experience. Some more common skills often requested are the ability to communicate orally and in writing, and to present information that you've gathered. Think of the KSAs as interview questions where you can use real-life experiences to illustrate the points on your résumé. Be sure to put each KSA on its own page and write about one-half to one page for each statement. You can approach the KSA with the CCAR method: Context, Challenge, Action, Result. Start by explaining the context in which the situation arose—for example, a job or a class assignment; then, the challenge you faced in getting the job done; the actions you took to fix the problem; and the resolution of your work. Not every agency uses the KSAs, and you might instead encounter a multiple-choice questionnaire when completing your application. These will obviously take you less time to complete, but you won't have as much freedom to showcase your experience.

An important last note: In the application process, all deadlines are absolute. Stay on top of everything, because you won't be able to get an extension. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Beyond Academia: Finding Meaningful Work with the Federal Government" by Jimmy Richardson, Associate Director for Government and Nonprofit Relations. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Useful Links

Wall Street Journal: [wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com)
New York Times: [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)
Washington Post: [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)
Atlanta Journal-Constitution: [ajc.com](http://www.ajc.com)
[Govexec.com](http://www.govexec.com)
[Federaltimes.com](http://www.federaltimes.com)
Individual agency websites
[Studentjobs.gov](http://www.studentjobs.gov)
[Usajobs.gov](http://www.usajobs.gov)
[Makingthedifference.org](http://www.makingthedifference.org)
[Firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov)
Federal Executive Boards (Available in most major metro areas. Atlanta's is [atlanta.feb.gov](http://www.atlanta.feb.gov))
The Yellow Pages online at [switchboard.com](http://www.switchboard.com) (Search "Federal Government")