
MPAs View Federal Employment: Incentives and Impediments

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Executive Summary

From a nationwide sample of 28 programs listed with the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, 477 first-year (mostly MPA) graduate students were surveyed. Federal civil service employment was found to be not nearly as appealing to these first-year students as expected. Federal jobs were a priority for only about one fourth of these students. Most viewed Federal jobs as offering attractive benefits and job security, but no other features were widely viewed as positive.

The single most powerful predictor of affinity for Federal jobs was having the personal career priority of having a real impact on national issues and believing that Federal jobs offer that opportunity. Also, compared to other MPA students, those students who were optimistic about job security and personal growth in Federal jobs were significantly more interested in such careers. Along with these opinion factors, the attraction to Federal jobs was stronger among those who have friends and relatives who work for the government.

Converting student interest into actual workers confronted at least one serious obstacle. Even students who were eager to get a Federal job believed that doing so would probably be a prolonged and laborious process.

MPAs View Federal Employment: Incentives and Impediments

What motivates the students who enter graduate programs in public administration and public affairs? What are their attitudes toward public service? Are they necessarily inclined toward working for the Federal government just because they are pursuing a Master of Public Administration (MPA), a Master of Public Affairs (MPA), or a similar degree?

Such questions are noteworthy for reasons beyond the mere curiosity of the professors who teach these incoming students. For several decades, practitioners and academics alike have been concerned about attracting talented and motivated young people to careers in public service. Much of that attention has been focused on Federal employment.

A 1964 Brookings Institution study (*Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings*) predicted that the Federal government would face serious problems competing with business to hire the highly skilled workers that each sector would need. That prediction was viewed as coming true in the late 1980s when Charles Levine and Rosslyn Kleeman (*1986*) feared that the situation may be sufficiently dire that the civil service is experiencing what amounts to a "quiet crisis" that if left unattended could produce major breakdowns in government performance in the future. @

In 1988, the National Commission on the Public Service, headed by Paul Volcker, issued its findings. The Volcker Commission @ also found that recruiting high-quality employees into the career service @ (and retaining them) is at the heart of the quiet crisis @ (p. 130). Other researchers (*Johnston, 1988; Sanders, 1989*) echoed those concerns.

These concerns have not gone away. Consequently, an Advisory Council on Public Service Careers was assembled in 1998 by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) to explore ways to invigorate student interest in these types of careers. In addition, NASPAA has convened a Task Force for Public Service and Public Service Education to address related issues.

The exact degree to which there is a Quiet crisis[®] is an important question but is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, this research is intended to contribute to this discussion by exploring the dynamics that attract MPA students to careers in Federal employment B regardless of the extent to which there is now a quiet crisis.

Research Questions and Scope

The attitudes of MPA students toward other kinds of public service careers will be explored elsewhere. The research reported here addresses two main questions:

- (1) How do first-year MPA students view typical Federal civil service jobs?
- (2) What factors motivate first-year MPA students to want to work in the Federal government?

To identify potential motivating factors for careers in the Federal government, a review of previous research was undertaken. Issues raised most often focused on salary, benefits, security, advancement, autonomy, altruism, and efficiency, and sometimes various other matters such as diversity, prestige, recognition, and co-workers. (*Kilpatrick, et al., 1964, Levine and Kleeman, 1986, Johnston, 1988, and Sanders, 1989.*)

Focus groups were next used to search for any attitudinal factors not cited in the literature as well as to amend and refine the draft questionnaire (1). A total of ten focus groups were conducted at four universities B the Catholic University of America (CUA); the George Washington University (GWU); the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UM,BC); and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT,K).

From the complete list of graduate programs on record with NASPAA, systematic random sampling B weighted by the available data on the size of the programs B was used to select 30 programs nationwide. Nearly all of the sampled programs participated (28 of 30).

As shown in Figure 1, the 28 programs represent a diverse array of both public and private, large and small, highly ranked and unranked, and those with and without significant minority enrollments. Most offer a Master of Public Administration, but two offer a Master of Public Affairs and one a M.S. in Public Policy and Management and Master of Public Management. (For brevity, these degrees are all referred to in this article as MPA.)



FIGURE 1: 28 SAMPLED MPA AND RELATED PROGRAMS

Typically, the questionnaires (which took about five minutes to answer) were administered to MPA students in courses offered primarily to first-year students. The in-class administration ensured a high response rate. Nationwide, 477 graduate students completed surveys regarding their attitudes toward Federal employment.

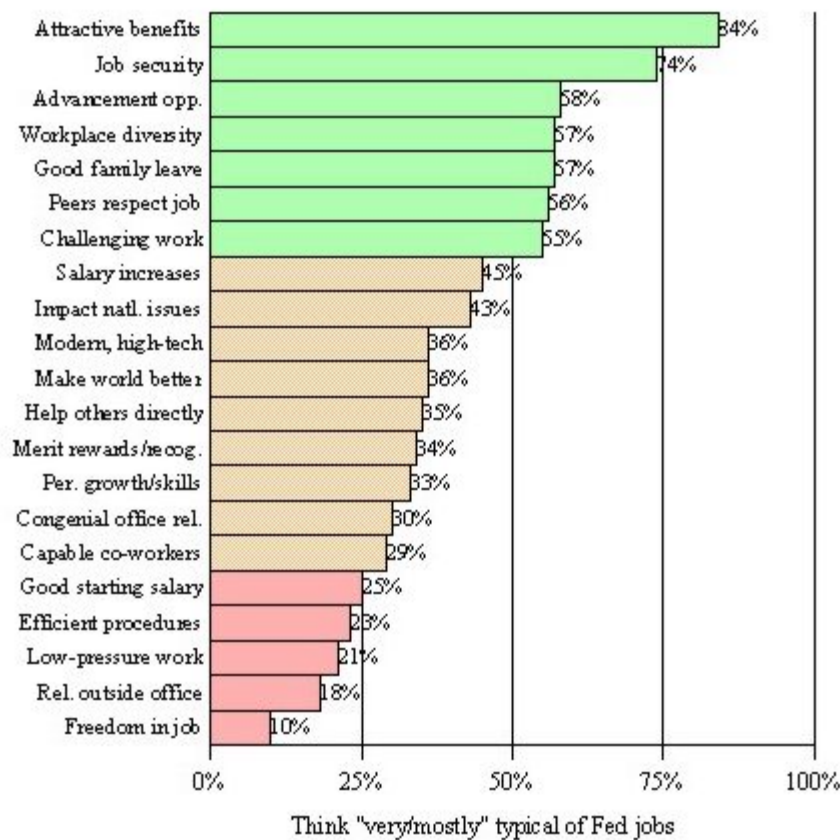
Impressions of Federal Jobs

To clarify the description of Federal civil service jobs, the survey instrument emphasized the following framework:

This survey seeks your impressions of working for the Federal government (but not in the military and not as an elected politician) in jobs where recent graduates of your program might be employed.

After that preface, students were asked to rate 21 job-related factors in terms of how typical do you think this is of a Federal government job. Each factor was rated on a five-point scale ranging from not at all typical (0) to very typical (4). Figure 2 reports the percent of first-year MPA students who ranked each factor as very or mostly typical of Federal jobs (i.e., the two highest scores on the five point scale).

FIG. 2: MPA STUDENT VIEWS OF TYPICAL FEDERAL JOBS



Federal jobs are widely viewed among these MPA students as providing attractive benefits (84%) and job security (74%). While almost half (45%) presume that salary increases are attractive, only one fourth (25%) think that the starting salaries are good.

About six out of ten MPAs envision typical Federal jobs as having several positive features, such as Aopportunities for career advancement@ (58%), Aworkplace diversity@ (57%), Asupportive family leave policies@ (57%), and Achallenging work@ (55%). Most (55%) also believe such Federal jobs are Arespected by your family and peers.@

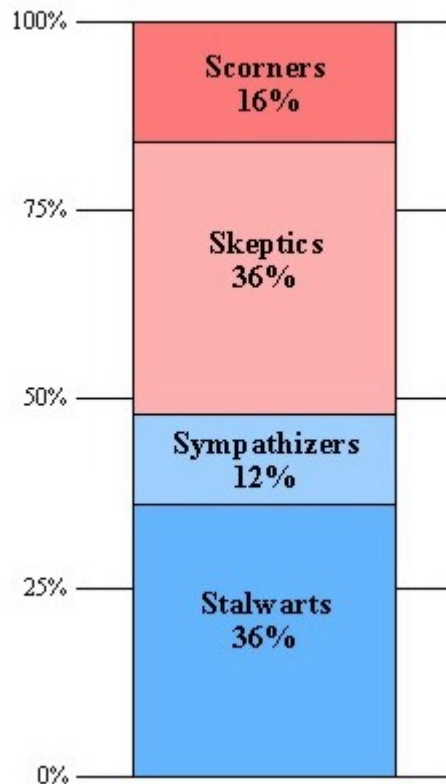
The most negative factor concerned empowerment. Only 10% thought that a typical Federal job held by college graduates would allow Afreedom to do your job your own way.@ And just 23% envision Aefficient procedures for conducting work.@

Regarding various other factors, only about one-fifth to one-third gave favorable ratings to typical Federal jobs. For example, just 35% expected such jobs would offer Achances to help other people directly.@ Only 34% believe there are Amerit-based rewards and recognition.@

The Appeal of Federal Careers

With these varied impressions of working for the Federal government, how many MPA students wish to pursue such a career? The affinity scale described below was constructed to calibrate each student=s degree of interest.

FIG 3: FEDERAL JOB AFFINITY



Stalwarts. Only 36% of the new graduate students in public administration and public policy said that working for the Federal government was either very appealing and/or that it was their top preference over other options (state or local government, non-profits, business and the private sector). These students are termed Stalwarts. (See Figure 3.)

Sympathizers. Altogether, 12% consider a Federal job fairly appealing and ranked it as their second choice (usually behind non-profits or state and local government). These students are designated "Sympathizers".

Skeptics. Students who consider a Federal job to be no more than slightly appealing and give it a lower priority but do say that at some point they would be willing to consider working for the Federal government were classified as Skeptics. They constituted 36% of those surveyed.

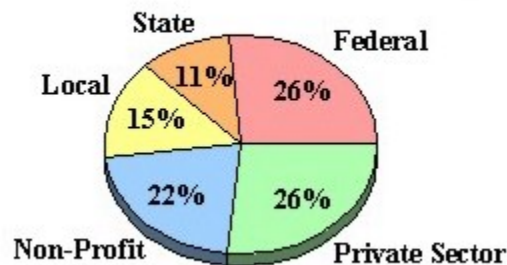
Scorners. A total of 16% of these graduate students said they would not even consider working for the Federal government at any time during their career. This group was labeled Scorners.

Overall, only about half (Stalwarts plus Sympathizers = 48%) of these mostly first-year graduate students in public administration, public affairs, and public policy have much desire to work for the Federal

government. If not in the Federal government, then what kind of careers do attract these students?

When asked to rank their preferences for working in five areas, barely half of the MPA students (52%) named government at any level as their first choice: 15% local government, 11% state government, and 27% federal government. The rest were divided between those who would most like to work for a non-profit organization (22%) or for a business or other organization in the private sector (26%). (See Fig. 4.)

FIG 4: PREFERRED CAREER SECTOR



That many MPA students actually have little interest in working for government may come as no surprise to graduate student advisors in NASPAA programs. Nevertheless, the nationwide extent of the disinterest was unexpected. These findings underscore the value of understanding what motivates public sector career decisions, particularly in the Federal government.

Predicting Affinity by Congruence Scores

What attitudes predict affinity for Federal careers among these students? Just knowing what they think of the Federal government on the 21 factors reviewed above is not sufficient to determine affinity because a particular factor may or may not be important to a particular student. Nor is knowing their career priorities alone enough, because students may or may not think that a Federal job would satisfy their priorities. What really matters is the congruence between students' personal priorities and their perception of Federal jobs.

A Congruence scores are thus the best predictors, calculated by weighting the perception of Federal jobs on a specific criterion by the importance each MPA student assigned to that criterion. That multiplication produces a low congruence score if a factor is either unimportant to a student or if Federal jobs are perceived as typically falling short on that factor. Conversely, the highest congruence score occurs when a factor is both identified as very important to a student and believed to be very characteristic of typical Federal jobs.

Impact National Issues. Using standard stepwise multiple regression, three congruence scores emerged as the most powerful predictors, as shown in Table 1. (Note that to avoid cluttering the model with variables that added little to its explanatory power, .001 was used as the significance threshold for the stepwise entry into the regression equation.) The strongest predictor, by far, is the congruence score on having a real impact on national issues. New MPA students who want to genuinely influence national issues and who believe that the Federal government provides a realistic chance to do that are far more inclined to want a Federal career than are their fellow students.

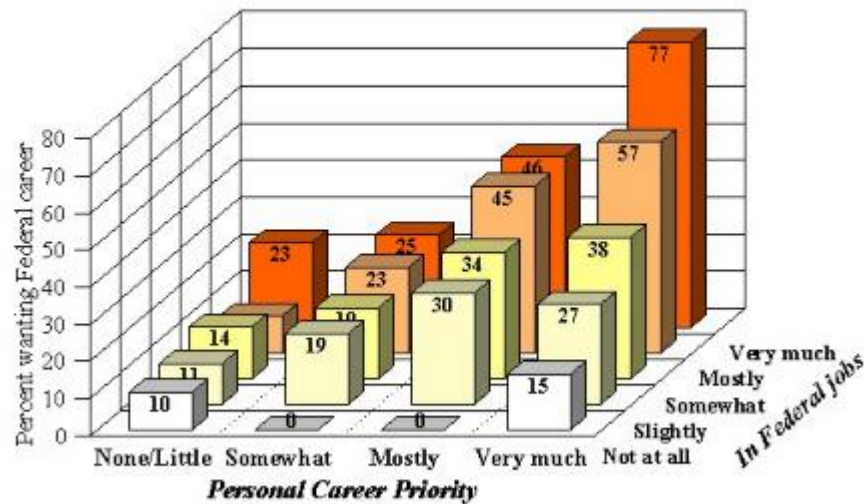
**Table 1
Predicting MPA Affinity for Federal Jobs**

| | | | Beta | Sig. | |
|---|------|-------|---------|----------------|--------|
| | | | Impact | national | issues |
| | | .224 | .0001 | | |
| Personal growth/skills | .194 | .0001 | | | |
| Job security | .118 | .001 | | | |
| | | .117 | Federal | friends/family | |
| | | | .001 | | |
| Multiple Correlation Coefficient: .48 (n=477) | | | | | |

When this relationship is examined in more detail, it appears even stronger than the multiple correlation coefficient suggests. As illustrated in Figure 5, when the personal value of wanting to impact national issues converges with the perception that Federal jobs often provide that opportunity, over three-fourths (77%) of these MPA students are Stalwarts who want to work for the Federal government. In contrast, few students

have an interest in Federal careers if they want to have an impact on national issues but see Federal jobs as essentially inconsequential.

FIG. 5: TOP PREDICTOR – CONGRUENCE ON “HAVE A REAL IMPACT ON NATIONAL ISSUES”



Personal growth and new skills. The second major attitudinal predictor was a student=s congruence on the desire for Apersonal growth and new skills@ and the belief that such opportunities were available in Federal jobs where they might be hired. Thus B despite the widespread impression that Federal jobs leave little latitude for the exercise of personal freedom when performing day-to-day responsibilities B those who are particularly attracted to Federal jobs do expect to gain skills and expand their competencies while in the Federal service. Conversely, MPA students who are skeptical of such opportunities are much less likely to be attracted to Federal careers.

Job Security. MPA students who personally value job security and believe Federal jobs offer such security are significantly more likely to want to work for the Federal government. While some commentators have

discounted all financial issues as motivating factors for public service, these findings show that among these graduate students Ajob security@ at least has a significant additional explanatory power, independent of Aimpacting national issues.@

The predictive power of job security certainly does not mean that Stalwarts had a vision of becoming wealthy on a Federal payroll. Nor are all those attracted to Federal employment driven by a fear of layoffs and downsizing in the private sector. It simply means that job security (both wanting it and believing that Federal jobs deliver it) helps, at least partially, to differentiate those who are more inclined to work for the Federal government from those who are not.

Three Dimensions. The key attitudinal factors that predict MPA affinity for Federal jobs thus span the dimensions of altruism, affluence, and actualization: (1) Altruism. AHave a real impact on national issues@ correlates with B but is much stronger in its predictive power than BAmake the world better@ and Ahelp other people directly.@ (2) Affluence/assurance. AJob security@ overlaps with B but is a better predictor than B other affluence variables such as Aattractive benefits,@Asalary increases,@ and Aattractive starting salary.@ (3) Actualization. APersonal growth and new skills@ correlates with B but it has more predictive power than B such variables as Achallenging work@ and Afreedom to do your job your own way.@

Contextual Predictor B Government Friends

The survey of students in 28 MPA programs revealed additional dynamics beyond the convergence of value priorities and Federal perceptions. After entering the opinion variables first, the stepwise multiple regression process next allowed demographic and other contextual variables to compete for additional explanatory power.

While demographics such as sex, race, and region were not strong enough to enter the regression equation, one factor did independently contribute additional predictive power beyond that accounted for by the three opinion variables discussed above. The additional factor was the extent to which students knew government workers personally. (See Table 1.) Simply having government workers as family and friends correlates

significantly and positively with favorable dispositions toward working for the Federal government. (See Table 1.)

On this factor, MPA students were scored in a range from A0" (no government workers as friends or relatives) to as high as A3" if they had government workers as (a) members of their immediate family, (b) other relatives, and (c) unrelated, good personal friends. Students who knew government workers in all three categories were significantly more likely to want Federal careers than were those with no such personal contacts (46% vs. 29% Stalwarts, respectively). In this case, familiarity bred respect, not contempt.

Impediments

While MPA Stalwarts say they want to work for the Federal government, that does not mean that they ultimately will. The survey uncovered a looming impediment to transforming abstract interest into real jobs: Most MPA students believe that applying for a Federal job is a long, burdensome process.

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree to the following statement:

Applying for a Federal job is a long, burdensome process.

From the point of view of facilitating Federal recruitment, disagree was the more desirable answer. However, only 9% denied that it was a long, burdensome process. Two-thirds (67%) agreed with the statement, while the rest (24%) took an in-between position or were uncertain.

The results are no better among the Stalwarts. While they may like the concept of having a real impact on national issues via a Federal career, only 10% think that securing such a job would not be a long, burdensome process, while a large majority (70%) believe the process is an onerous one.

In the tight labor market of the late 1990s, with many employers aggressively courting graduate students, these are not minor obstacles. Even many pro-Federal Stalwarts may be discouraged when forced to

choose between concrete job opportunities in the private sector versus what they see as the lengthy, arduous task of obtaining a comparable Federal job.

A recent graduate told one focus group:

AI was offered a job almost before I went in to interview [one company]... But there are government jobs that I applied for where they said they couldn't even get back to me for six months.@

Summary

Federal jobs do not appeal to as many entering MPA students as one might expect. Altogether, fewer than half exhibit much interest in working for the Federal government. Most MPA students do view Federal jobs as offering attractive benefits and job security, but nothing else about such jobs is widely viewed as decidedly positive.

A portion of these graduate students (36%) believe that Federal jobs offer the opportunity to have a real impact on national issues.@ If that is also a personal priority, that congruence represents the single most powerful predictor of affinity for Federal jobs.

The attraction to Federal jobs is also stronger among those who value personal growth and job security and believe Federal jobs often have those virtues. Along with these attitudinal factors, Federal jobs appeal more to those students who have friends and relatives who work for the government.

Even among those students who are interested, converting that interest into actual employment confronts at least one serious obstacle. Even MPA students who are most eager to get a Federal job frequently believe that doing so would probably be a protracted and laborious process.

Notes

1. The ten focus groups did not reveal any unexpected motivating factors, but they were valuable for refining the language used to describe each factor in the questionnaire. The focus groups also

helped separate some broad concepts into more precise ones. For example, A good salary@ was divided into Attractive starting salary@ and Attractive salary increases over time.@

2. The exact wording of each factor was as follows:

- Attractive salary increases over time
- Attractive starting salary
- Attractive medical/retirement/other benefits
- Capable co-workers
- Challenging work
- Chances to help other people directly
- Congenial social relations at the office
- Diversity in the workplace
- Efficient procedures for conducting work
- Freedom to do your job your own way
- Have a real impact on national issues
- Job respected by your family and peers
- Job security (low risk of losing job)
- Merit-based rewards and recognition
- Modern, high-tech equipment/facilities
- Mostly low-pressure work days
- Opportunities for career advancement
- Opportunities to make the world better
- Personal growth and new skills
- Strong relations with co-workers outside the office
- Supportive family leave policies

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