CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Description of the Field:
The United States Federal Government now employs about 2 million people and performs a wide variety of functions, such as representing U.S. interests abroad; protecting the environment; overseeing air traffic control operations; conducting the global war on terrorism; providing public services; enforcing laws regarding safety, health and education; and administering various public assistance programs. The executive branch is the largest of the three federal government branches and is composed of the Office of the President, the 14 executive departments and over 90 independent agencies, employing 97.8 percent of all federal workers.

International affairs positions in government do not just exist in agencies such as the Department of State and the Agency for International Development as almost every federal department and agency maintains an international affairs division. Federal job hunters are encouraged to explore a wide variety of agencies that may be involved with international policymaking.

Hiring within the federal government is decentralized. Each federal agency manages its own hiring, so it is best to view each agency as a separate employer. While the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) regulates hiring practices and provides vacancy information for the entire federal government, it is necessary to contact each agency’s personnel office to obtain detailed information about its career opportunities.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries:
Federal workers are employed in almost every conceivable occupation. Approximately two out of every three federal workers are employed in a professional specialty, administrative support or executive, administrative and managerial occupations. There are two main career tracks to consider: Foreign Service and Civil Service.

- The Foreign Service is a branch of the Federal Government popular with Elliott School graduates. Foreign Service Officers spend the majority of their time outside the U.S., with occasional stateside rotations. The only means of entry into the Foreign Service is via the examination process, and placements can take up to two years. So if this is a career path students are considering seriously, they should aim to take the written examination during the spring before or during their first year of a 2-year Master’s program. The oral examination is offered at different times throughout the ensuing fall and winter. It can take up to a year to be placed following successful completion of the oral examination phase, as more candidates pass than there are positions to fill.

- Civil Service positions can be gained through the competitive hiring process (i.e. government positions posted to USAJobs.com and other sites) or through application to the Presidential Management Fellowship program, which is a 2-year, fast-track program for graduate students. There are also agency-specific fellowship programs that allow access to entry-level positions. Hiring for full-time Civil Service positions happens throughout the year as positions become available. The application process for the Presidential Management Fellowship Program starts in early fall of a student’s final year of graduate study.

Some government positions also require supplemental information. Recently, submitting KSAs (Knowledge, Skills and Abilities) has become less frequent and occurs later in the process. Should your application require one, Elliott School Graduate Student Career Development office has KSA examples available for review.

Internships are technically available along both tracks, since the State Department internship offers placements either within the State Department bureaus in DC, or in embassies abroad. State Department, CIA, DIA and many other internship applications are due between October and November to allow for ample time in which to perform the necessary security clearance required of these positions. There are some internships that have a later application deadline, and many internships not requiring clearance may even have spring deadlines. Students should be aware of the Rosenthal Fellowship, which places U.S. and foreign nationals in internships within the DC federal community, including on Capitol Hill. Applications for the Rosenthal Fellowship are normally due in the beginning of December.
Though an appropriate position opening cannot be guaranteed for all returning interns within their respective agencies, the internship experience can greatly increase the chances of an intern’s employment within the same agency where the internship experience has been a mutually rewarding one. Despite a rigid Civil Service competitive process, insider connections and recommendations can weigh heavily on the hiring decision and some agencies even see their internship program as a direct feeder for future full-time offers (OMB, CIA, Treasury, Fed).

There is currently a notable backlog for security clearances and, because of the time and expense they incur, they are worth their weight in gold. Anyone even considering work with the U.S. government that requires a security clearance is strongly encouraged to complete a summer internship that gains him/her a basic clearance.

**Pay Systems**

There are eight predominant pay systems. Approximately half of the workforce is under the General Schedule (GS) pay scale, 20 percent under the Postal Service rates and about 10 percent are paid under the Prevailing Rate Schedule (WG) Wage Grade Classification. The remaining pay systems are for the Executive Schedule, Foreign Service, Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities scales and Veterans Health Administration. Starting pay depends on the level of experience, education and complexity of the position. Throughout the federal government, jobs are ranked according to level of responsibility and difficulty, and are assigned corresponding “grades.” A combination of three factors can help potential employees understand where they fall in the GS scale: education, experience, and location. Even if a candidate falls solidly into a specific GS level, there may be room for negotiation along the “steps” within that GS level that depend on these three factors. In the federal system, where an employee lives affects the amount he or she is paid because pay is adjusted for cost of living. This is called a “locality pay rate.” To access the General Schedule and view locality pay rates, visit [http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/2015/general-schedule](http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/2015/general-schedule). For some hard-to-fill positions, agencies may be able to offer a “special pay rate” that allows them to offer more attractive salaries for selected occupations. Salaries can also rise quickly once employees have gained experience working in the government. As of 2015, starting salary for someone with a Master’s degree is approximately $52,668 per year (GS-9) or higher in the D.C. area.

Lastly, it’s important to note that since the Federal Government offers opportunities in just about every field and at all levels, working for the Federal Government can be a great career builder, not simply a career.

Federal employment is generally not affected by cyclical fluctuations in the economy as are other private sector industries, but political changes can influence staffing levels. Each presidential administration may have different public policy priorities that result in greater levels of federal employment in some programs and reductions in others. After an election is an especially opportune time to search for positions, since new congressional members or a new White House administration will need fresh staff. Hiring is also increased at the end of September – the end of the government’s fiscal year. Any leftover money is often used to fill vacancies, so start informational interviewing in August to get ahead of the game.

A notable portion of the federal workforce (44% of its 1.9 million employees, including 60% of its senior managers) is expected to retire by 2010. This will leave a large vacuum in mid to upper level management that will need to be filled, and will require increased hiring at all levels over the next 5 years. The government has already begun an advertising campaign to try to bring in new talent, is under pressure to revamp its Presidential Fellowship Program to attract future leadership and has also begun to bolster the ranks of its HR to be able to handle the increase in applications.

**Recommended Qualifications to Enter Field:**

- Superior written and oral communication skill
- Excellent research and data analysis skills
- Prior work experience
- Strong work ethic and dedication
- Demonstrated leadership skills
- For international offices within particular agencies, specific regional or technical expertise is often necessary, along with knowledge of foreign languages (Arabic, Chinese and Farsi are the current “hot” languages).
- Proven commitment to public service
- Ability to work in a team environment
- Demonstrated ability to work under time constraints
Sample Employers and Resources for Additional Information:

Employers:
- Central Intelligence Agency  [http://www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)
- Congressional Budget Office  [http://www.cbo.gov](http://www.cbo.gov)
- Congressional Research Service  [http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo](http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo)
- Department of Commerce  [http://www.doc.gov](http://www.doc.gov)
- Department of Energy  [http://www.doe.gov](http://www.doe.gov)
- Department of Health and Human Services  [http://www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)
- Department of Justice  [http://www.justice.gov](http://www.justice.gov)
- Department of Labor  [http://www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)
- Department of State  [http://www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)
- Department of Transportation  [http://www.dot.gov](http://www.dot.gov)
- Department of the Treasury  [http://treas.gov](http://treas.gov)
- Environmental Protection Agency  [http://www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)
- Office of Management and Budget  [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb)
- US Trade Representative  [http://ustr.gov](http://ustr.gov)

Internet Resources:
- AvueCentral  [http://www.avuecentral.com](http://www.avuecentral.com)
- Brad Traverse  [http://www.bradtraverse.com](http://www.bradtraverse.com)
- Federal Job Search  [http://www.americajobs.com](http://www.americajobs.com)
- USA JOBS  [http://www.USAJOBS.opm.gov](http://www.USAJOBS.opm.gov)
Course Suggestions for Careers in Federal Government

The following list represents a sampling of different courses offered throughout The George Washington University that would be appropriate for this career field. As academic departments continually update their bulletin, these courses might not be available on a regular schedule. This list does not include required courses in the Core or Regional Fields and does not correspond to, though it closely follows, the curriculum for graduation. Students should consult their academic advisors to see if taking some of the courses below fits into their academic plan.

**International Affairs:**
- Science, Technology & Public Policy
- U.S. Space Policy
- Issues in U.S. Space Policy
- Environmental Security
- Defense Policy/Program Analysis I
- Defense Policy/Program Analysis II
- National Security Resources
- Transnational Security Issues
- Transatlantic Relations
- Homeland Security
- Nuclear Security
- US Foreign Policy & International Organizations
- Environmental Security
- Responses to Terrorism
- U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East
- Drug Trafficking in the Americas
- Analyzing International Economic Data
- Strategy & International Political Economy
- Nuclear Proliferation / Nonproliferation
- Technology Creation / Diffusion
- Military Technology Assessment
- Cybersecurity
- Digital Trade and Global Governance Issues
- Contemporary Issues in US Diplomacy

**Political Science:**
- Introduction to Political Analysis
- American Political Process
- State & Urban Policy Problems
- International Political Economy
- Politics of International Institutions
- U.S. Foreign Policy Making
- Politics of U.S. National Security Policy
- International Security Politics

**History:**
- 20th Century U.S. Foreign Policy
- Readings Seminar – Recent U.S. History

**Public Administration:**
- Cross-Sectoral Governance in the U.S. Federal System
- Federalism & Public Policy
- Managing State & Local Governments
- Governmental Budgeting
- Environmental Policy

**Political Psychology:**
- Political Violence and Terrorism

**Political Management:**
- Lobbying the Budget Process

**Economics:**
- Labor Economics
- Economics of Defense
- Survey of International Trade Theory and Policy
- Health Economics

**Professional Skills Courses:**
- Congress and Foreign Policy
- Protocol in Diplomacy and International Business
- Cross-Cultural Communication
- Developing Effective Proposals
- Leadership Vision and Strategy
- Advocacy Strategies
- Nuts and Bolts of U.S. Trade Policy
- Political Analysis
- Principles of Financial Statement Analysis
- Public Speaking
- Analysis the Federal Budget
- Writing for International Affairs Professionals