The Role of Internships in Attracting Quality Talent to the Public Sector

The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars profiles four diverse young professionals who launched their careers in public service as interns.

Jennifer Clinton

The threat of a human capital crisis looms ominously over the federal community. The disconcerting reality of the situation is laid out in the President’s Management Agenda (PMA) and splashed across the headlines of publications such as The Public Manager. The PMA report notes:

In most agencies, human resource planning is weak. Workforce deficiencies will be exacerbated by the upcoming retirement wave of the baby-boom generation. Approximately 71 percent of the government’s current permanent employees will be eligible for either regular or early retirement by 2010, and then 40 percent of those employees are expected to retire. Without proper planning, the skill mix of the federal workforce will not reflect tomorrow’s changing missions.

To manage the threat before it develops into a true crisis, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has outlined a practical framework to help guide agencies get to green on the PMA scorecard in the area of the strategic management of human capital. OPM offers a list of questions agencies should ask themselves to assess strengths and potential deficiencies in their ability to attract, acquire, and retain quality talent. (This information is available on http://apps.opm.gov/humancapital/standards.)

Attracting New Talent

Two questions specifically address the talent issue. Are senior leaders and managers involved in strategic recruitment and retention initiatives? Are recruitment strategies appropriately aggressive and multifaceted?

OPM emphasizes the importance of senior management involvement in not only developing a recruitment strategy, but also dedicating resources—financial, human capital, electronic, and others to ensure that the agency is able to draw quality candidates into public service. According to OPM, this task should be a priority of the entire agency, not simply the recruiting division of the human resources (HR) office.

With respect to recruitment strategy of other federal agencies, OPM encourages them to “establish an ongoing presence with professional organizations, colleges/universities, veteran organizations, and minority and community groups.” In addition, OPM names internships—presidential management interns, career interns, and other internships—as important instruments agencies should utilize as a means to develop deep and fertile pools of talent.

Internship Programs

Agencies have a broad array of options to choose from in the category described by OPM as “other internships.” The Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), the Student Temporary Educational Program (STEP), summer employment, volunteer service, and the Federal Internship Program are among them. The variety of options is a curse and a blessing for both the agency and the student. On the one hand, it gives an agency significant flexibility to provide young people an opportunity to “test drive” a career in public service. On the other hand, it causes great confusion.

Jennifer Clinton is manager of government program development for The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars (www.twc.edu). She can be reached at jennifer@twc.edu
among agency managers outside of HR as well as students who have difficulty navigating and understanding the technicalities and accessibility of the various options.

Most agencies have some type of internship program. Some are markedly more robust than others; likely resulting from senior management commitment to devise strategy and dedicate resources to establish an effective program.

Internships can be useful in diffusing the gravity of the human capital crisis.

But qualifying “effectiveness” is a tricky task for HR and internship program directors. What if a student is hired by another government agency? What if former interns attend graduate school before accepting full-time employment? Is there an effective way to track these students over the course of a two-to-five year span? In addition, students may seek employment in a regional federal office without the internship site’s knowledge.

Senior Management Involvement

This series of articles aims to draw out a more practical roadmap to build on OPM’s broad guidance of encouraging agencies to “use options such as presidential management intern, career interns, and other internships.” The series will consist of three parts. The goal of the first is to establish and reiterate OPM’s message of the importance of senior management’s involvement with strategic recruitment and retention initiatives. Showcased below are real life examples of how internships have proven to be a critical and effective means of attracting, acquiring, and retaining talent. Each one of the four leaders described launched his career through an internship experience in the public sector.

The second article of the series will provide a case study of how various government agencies use internships as a recruitment tool, and thereby offer a few best practices recommendations.

The third will further examine OPM’s recommendation to federal agencies to work with professional organizations, colleges, and universities. It will explore the role such organizations play or can play in encouraging young people to explore a career in public service and suggest how agencies can best leverage relationships with these institutions.

Four Internship Profiles

The stories shared below are testament to OPM’s conclusion that internships are important training ground for the next generation of public sector leaders. Frank Corrigan, Bruce Ingalls, Omar Vargas, and Jimmy Glossfelter entered public service through The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars program. The Washington Center has been training future leaders since 1975. Over the course of 28 years, 30,000 young people have participated in the program. Twenty-five percent of Washington Center alumni work or have worked in the public sector at the state, local, and federal levels.

Frank Corrigan, Management Analyst, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Washington, DC.

As a junior in college, Frank Corrigan finally settled on political science as his declared major. This was a bit of a change from his original plan of majoring in biochemistry. Like many upper-classmen, he realized the days of limitless options were quickly coming to a close. It was time to hunker down and focus not only fulfilling his major requirements, but think about how his new “declaration” would translate into a professional career. To reduce some of the uncertainties and guesswork of answering these questions, Frank decided to test drive a career in political science through an internship in Washington DC. What better place than the nation’s capital to see for himself if he had made the right decision.

Frank enrolled in the summer internship program and was offered three different opportunities. He decided to accept the offer from then-freshman Congressman Albert Gore in the House of Representatives. Frank was shocked at the level of responsibility he was given in Congressman Gore’s office. During his first day of work, his supervisor bluntly told him that he was not “there to lick envelopes.” Reflecting on how the experience shaped his perspective, Frank stated:

The internship experience focused my thinking about working in the public sector. It helped me understand the structure of the federal government and opened doors within these agencies that would never be possible if I had not come to Washington.

With this newfound perspective and appreciation for public service, Frank applied for a job with the Michigan State Government in the Office of Economic Expansion after graduating from Michigan State University. He worked as special assistant to the director.

Frank then enrolled in graduate school to study public administration and energy policy, and landed a job with the Department of Energy (DOE) in Washington, DC, working with conservation and renewable resources policy. He returned to the University of Michigan to earn an advanced degree in political science/fiscal policy. Upon graduating, Frank joined the US Department of Agriculture’s Office of the Chief Financial Officer.

Frank believes his internship experience was invaluable in that it gave him the focus and exposure he needed to feel confident about the usefulness of his degree in political science. He feels that many students experience similar concerns about not knowing how their theoretical work translates into a practical profession.
Bruce Ingalls, Chief, Collections Section, National Finance Center, US Customs Service, Indianapolis, IN.

An economics and political science major at the University of New Hampshire, Bruce Ingalls knew he was interested in public service. He decided to spend the first semester of his senior year in Washington, DC. He landed an internship job with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which gave him the practical experience he craved to help steer him towards a career in public service. "Working at the Safety Board gave me contacts and showed me the reality of the profession." Bruce was highly involved in the NTSB's drunk driving policy. He was so successful at his job that NTSB asked him to continue his internship beyond the 13-week semester. He ended up extending his internship even upon his return to school and worked on the project during his holiday break. So valuable was Bruce to the project that NTSB ended up compensating him for an additional four weeks of service.

Based on his highly successful experience with NTSB, Bruce admits he thought job offers would "pour in" during his final semester in school. Unfortunately, this was not the case. It took him a while to get hired in the federal government as a full-time employee. He finally did and has been with the US Customs Service ever since. He worked in Vermont for five years, in Brunswick, GA for several years, and has been in Indiana since then. Bruce has been committed to helping young people formulate their career goals. As business brings him back to Washington, DC, he speaks to current Washington Center interns about the rewards a career in public service.

James Glofety, Senior Policy Advisor, Department of Education, Washington, DC.

Jimmy Glofety participated in The Washington Center's leadership seminar in 1986 where he was exposed to the policy-making process in Washington. Students are exposed to high-level government officials through lectures and networking opportunities. One of the presentations made such an impression that he is certain he still has a copy of it somewhere in his files.

For Jimmy, The Washington Center experience built on his inner passion for leadership. He was a political science major at Texas Christian University. Upon graduation, he worked in his father's business in San Antonio. A few months into his job, he quit and moved up to Washington, DC and pounded the pavement for two months before landing a position in a small lobbying shop. He later made his way to Congressman Sam Johnson's (R-TX) office and worked his way up to become legislative director. He then returned to Texas and worked on energy and telecommunications issues, and in 1994 helped Governor Bush with the telecom reform policy in Texas, juggling five to six different policy directives.

Jimmy points out that to be successful in the public sector, it is important to set clear goals. "It is ineffective to try to be everything to everybody. With a clear mission, policy objectives are attainable. That is not to say that these objectives do not sometimes get caught up in politics; in this town, that is inevitable."

From his private sector job after serving the governor, Jimmy was plucked by the Bush administration to come to Washington, DC to get involved in electricity issues at DOE. His first task was to manage and learn from the California energy crises. He has implemented policy on how to build infrastructures to avoid the same type of crisis in the future and has led a major study of revolutionary transmission system.

Jimmy is in charge of a new program office in which internships may play a role. When asked about his opinion of internship programs, he stressed importance of ensuring there is a structured program in place that is goal oriented. He has witnessed too often a hasty decision of managers to hire interns without any consideration of how they will be managed or what concrete assignments interns will be given.

Omar Vargas, Attorney, Special Assistant to the Director, Office of Violence Against Women, Department of Justice (DOJ), and Intern Coordinator, Washington, DC.

Omar participated in The Washington Centers Minority Leaders Fellowship Program during the fall semester of his junior year in college in 1993 and interned with the government affairs division of the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. It was through this experience that he gained tremendous exposure to Congress and the legislative process as well as the executive branch of government. During his internship, he interacted with both branches of government and was therefore able to better understand the role interest groups play in the policy-making process. He describes his experience as a window into "how Washington really works."

Upon his return to Seton Hall University, Omar stayed in touch with the dozens of contacts he made during his internship. He attended law school and continued to maintain his Washington connections that later helped him land a job with DOJ as a special assistant to the director of the Office of Violence Against Women. Omar admits his internship experience was invaluable and helped pave the way for his current position. It is not a coincidence that Omar also
Do you need help with...

Strategically managing human capital?

Competitive sourcing?

Improving financial performance?

Implementing e-government?

Integrating budget and performance?

LMI can help you “get to green” in these five major elements of The President’s Management Agenda. We can also help you with other pressing management needs, and we are available through the GSA Schedules.

LMI

A nonprofit organization dedicated to improving public-sector management

Contact Paul Weiss at 703-917-7154, or go to www.lmi.org.

spends his time at DOI coordinating his department’s intern program.

Omar was responsible for convincing other managers and the director of his division of the value of internships not only to students, but to the employer as well. Many in his division felt that interns were more work than they were worth. Because of Omar’s appreciation for the internship experience along with his dedication to mentoring young people, he now oversees a successful and vibrant internship program that provides students with a substantive work experience and gives his colleagues an additional resource of bright, motivated project support staff.

Other Intern Perspectives

“Without the internship experience, I would not have had a career in the government.”—Howard Brayer, Kean University, budget analyst, Department of Education.

“The last project I worked on during my internship was to help assemble the resources for the soon-to-be opened naturalist center. I knew that was where I wanted to be, and four years later I got the job, as manager, and have been there for 20 years now!”—Richard Eftihim, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1976, program director, Naturalist Center, Smithsonian Institution, intern with the Smithsonian Institution.

“In just a few months, I learned more practical information than years of academic study could provide. The internship helps demystify the congressional process and teaches the importance of the personal and political relationships among the players.”—Karen Harrison, University of Illinois, 1982, environmental lawyer, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), intern with Congressman Paul Simon.

“The internship experience was critical to my career. My placement was perfectly matched to my interests and needs. I would not be where I am today if (the intern program) had not been a part of my life experience.”—Ted Kiker, Grinnell College, 1985, Office of Policy and Evaluation, Department of State, intern with US Information Agency.

“My internship experience gave me a great introduction to DC which, in turn, opened up the door to achieving my career goal: serving the public through federal employment.”—Lois Gartner, Guilford College, 1985, program analyst, EPA, intern with the American Committee on East-West Accord.

Conclusion

These stories of successful internship experiences give senior management solid proof of the critical role internships play in attracting talented young leaders into the public sector. By dedicating the resources necessary to assess and develop internship programs not just for the sake of getting to green but for the sake of ensuring that the skill mix of the federal workforce reflects tomorrow’s changing missions, internships can be useful in diffusing the gravity of the human capital crisis in the federal government.