



How the federal government can revive early-career internships

Despite a call-out in the President's Management Agenda, federal internships are still on life support, often deprioritized or overlooked altogether by agencies grappling with workforce planning. Tellingly, only 7% of the federal workforce is under the age of 30, even though this demographic represents 20% of the U.S. population.

Generation Z, born in or after 1997, will make up a growing share of the workforce in the years to come. Gen Z is tech-savvy, more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations, and on track to be the best-educated generation yet. They are also service-oriented and want to make a difference in society. Internships offer members of Gen Z opportunities to apply these unique qualities and talents to federal service while offering young people a firsthand view of federal work and the chance to contribute to the greater good. These experiences are key to raising trust in government among young people, which our latest nationally representative survey places at just 30% for the 18-34 age group.

The Partnership has been working with federal workforce and higher education partners for more than 20 years. During this time, we have learned what it takes to build and sustain a successful internship program. While Congress and the administration must do more to facilitate internships, the largest changes can happen at the agency level. Agencies must make a long-term, strategic commitment to internship programming to see a return on their investments. This programming, regardless of whether it is spotlighted in the PMA, should be part of agency workforce planning because it is the best way to bring known, skilled, early-career talent into the federal workforce.

Based on our research and our experience running the [Future Leaders in Public Service Internship Program](#), we recommend that agencies, Congress and the administration support and implement the following recommendations.

Internship Design

Eliminate unpaid internships

Federal agencies should lead the way in eliminating unpaid internships. Students deserve to be compensated for their work, and unpaid internships drastically reduce the diversity of agency talent pools.

Offer part-time and virtual opportunities

Providing both part-time and virtual internship opportunities expands the potential talent pool and helps agencies reach students they do not traditionally attract. While 85% of full-time federal



opportunities reside outside the Washington, D.C., area, internships are disproportionately located at headquarters. Offering virtual opportunities attracts students in remote locations or those who cannot financially afford to move to Washington, D.C.

In 2023, the Partnership placed a total of 238 summer interns in our Future Leaders in Public Service Internship Program, and 132 of these interns were fully virtual. According to agency supervisors, students working virtually contributed equally to the work of the agency and performed at the same high level as those working in person.

Provide meaningful work

There are no shortage of opportunities to make an impact in the federal arena, and Gen Z wants to contribute. Providing students with “busy work” is a missed opportunity. Agencies are much less likely to convert those students to full-time employment, and supervisors are not able to assess the student’s true capability to perform mission-related work in a full-time capacity.

Recruitment

Be strategic about timing

Top private sector programs are recruiting in the fall and offering placements early in the new year. Too often, federal agencies do not post opportunities until the private sector is almost done making offers. Post in the fall to be competitive and to attract the attention of top talent. Also, be consistent with posting timelines and availability so career advisors know what to expect and can advise students accordingly.

Tell your stories

Many students do not know about compelling career opportunities in government or how to apply to them. Gen Z is looking for purpose. Make your work and mission relatable, incorporate young talent in storytelling and, when possible, tie the work to local communities. If your internship programming has run for several years, use former interns as ambassadors for your program.

Meet them where they are

Agencies cannot continue to only post on USAJOBS and expect students to find opportunities. Some tried-and-true methods still apply—go to campuses, meet students and build relationships with career advisors. Tools like Handshake and social media platforms reach thousands of students. Be strategic about which platforms you use and leverage social media influencers, if possible.

Don’t limit your talent pool based on the name of the school

Federal agencies need highly skilled, diverse talent, and those students are not only found in Ivy League schools or top technical universities. Don’t let the school name be a proxy for capability. There are talented students found in every corner of this country at every community college, private college and public university.

Expand thinking on recruiting for diversity

The U.S. has over 700 minority-serving institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities. Agencies should



continue to build relationships and recruit from these important institutions, as well as seek out large public universities and community colleges which are often untapped sources of diverse talent. For example, 24% of George Mason University's undergraduate population is composed of first-generation college students.

Communicate upfront and frequently

Internship opportunities have a limited recruitment window, and students are hoping to lock down their job as quickly as possible. At the beginning of the process, provide clear information on timing so students know what to expect and communicate frequently. Every email does not have to be individualized; communicate to the group on status to keep job seekers engaged and excited about the process.

Partner

Agencies are not in this fight for talent alone. There are many nonprofit organizations and colleges and universities that want to support this effort. Learn from others and strategically partner to overcome obstacles. For example, in 2022, the Partnership founded the Future Leaders in Public Service Internship Program to directly support agencies with internship programming. In addition, we just released our Federal Internship Finder to help students find and apply for almost 1,000 different federal internship opportunities, and our [GoGovernment](#) website, the premier site for students and career counselors looking for information on federal opportunities, garners 1 million visits per year.

Internship Programming

Build strong programming

The work doesn't stop when an intern is hired. An agency must provide interns with a well-rounded experience so they are better equipped to apply for a job and successfully work for the agency. We recommend programming that includes an orientation, professional skill building, guest speakers and networking. If possible, build in a mentorship component, which provides an added layer of support for interns. If done well, programming makes a distinct difference in preparing students for full-time federal opportunities, as evidenced by the 2023 summer cohort of our Future Leaders program:

- **93%** of respondents indicated that they know the opportunities that exist in government for students and recent graduates (vs. 56% in pre-survey).
- **83%** of respondents indicated that they are comfortable finding federal opportunities using USAJOBS (vs. 36% in pre-survey).
- **80%** of respondents indicated that they are comfortable building a federal resume (vs. 23% in pre-survey).

Don't forget about supervisors

Your supervisors need support when you build an internship program. Managing interns is different than managing full-time, more experienced staff. Provide initial training with clear keys to success

and check in frequently. Training and support will not only further engage your supervisors, but it will also directly impact the experience of your interns.

Build performance goals and metrics into the internship

When interns begin, they should work with their supervisor to establish clear performance goals for the length of the internship. This process will provide focus and clarity for interns as they work, as well as a more objective and documented way to determine whether the intern should be recommended for full-time employment.

Track, evaluate, learn and improve

The data for internship programs are sparse. Agencies must actively establish mechanisms to collect and manage data from all aspects of the internship talent cycle to evaluate recruitment efforts and programming. Human capital leadership and internship coordinators must learn from program evaluations and work to improve their program with each new cycle.

Securing Internships as a Talent Pipeline

Internships should be a key element in workforce planning

Make internships part of your long-term strategy, not only when it's a PMA or a legislative priority. Use student internships as the primary method to fill your early-career talent pipeline, as these students are a known entity to your supervisors. This perspective must permeate all levels of an organization. It is not enough that agency leadership and human capital offices support internship programming—managers across the agency must prioritize funding and opportunities for interns.

Make room for entry-level jobs

While there is value in exposing interns to the federal government, the ultimate goal of an internship is to build a pathway to employment. Government has historically shown a disproportionate preference for experienced professionals, limiting opportunities for promising young talent. It is discouraging for students to finish a successful internship only to find no opportunities for a full-time job. Agencies must capitalize on the investments made for their internship programs.

Structural Reform

Revitalize and resource the Pathways Programs

Congress and the administration should work together to revitalize the Pathways Programs and other programs for interns and recent graduates. Legislative reform opportunities include creating budget incentives for agencies to hire more interns and ensure they are paid, lowering the required hours for converting interns to permanent jobs and requiring a database of conversion-eligible candidates for agencies to select from.

Enable conversion of interns to full-time positions

Many agencies source internship talent from third-party (external) providers, in some cases using these types of programs in lieu of or in addition to the Pathways Programs. However, interns that



come through a third-party program are not allowed to convert to full-time status following the successful completion of an internship, causing agencies to lose out on a robust pipeline of early-career talent. Congress should create a hiring mechanism to allow high-performing interns from qualified programs to be converted to full-time employment.

Increase or remove caps on streamlined hiring authority for students and recent graduates

To further encourage agencies to hire interns and early-career talent where conversion isn't an option, Congress should raise or remove the statutory cap on the direct-hire authority for recent college graduates and post-graduate students.

Standardize and require data collection on all federal internships

Congress should provide the Office of Personnel Management with the authority to set data standards and collect data from agencies on third-party internships and develop a mechanism for reporting such data through an online dashboard.