
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Making government service the first choice for more college students

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June 26, 2013 — After listening to speeches, posing for photos, and receiving their diplomas over the last several weeks, the top new graduates of the nation's well-regarded public and private universities who are not headed back into classrooms as graduate students will be flocking toward their first post-college jobs. For many of these top-tier students, those jobs will be at consulting, finance, or tech companies. Why?

It is not as though public service employers or facilitators *can't* do a better job of attracting more top candidates, but rather that many do not.

This article is not about the phenomenon of a Gordon Gecko-esque culture where the fact and the panache of material benefits swamp all other considerations for job seekers, nor is it an exploration of the broad decline in recent decades in the cultural cachet of public service.

It *is* about what our reporting confirms are three crucial factors that collegiate job seekers, not surprisingly, find appealing: a structured application process, prestige, and opportunities for skill development and career advancement. Finance, consulting, and tech provide them; for the most part, public sector employers do not.

It is not as though public service employers or facilitators *can't* do a better job of attracting more top candidates — NASA attracts a slew of talented candidates, and Teach for America had 57,000 applicants this year — but rather that many do not.

Part of that problem is fixable, we found, if agencies followed the lead of aggressive private sector (and, less frequently, public sector) recruiting at universities. Additionally, more cooperation between and among different federal, state, and local employers; between and among colleges; and between and among colleges and government employers would also be a boon.

But the brakes that have been put on government spending across-the-board act as a fundamental constraint. That constraint limits significantly the ability of such employers to offer clear, steady, and, ultimately, prestigious first-choice options.

Thus, while many would say that lack of environmental and other regulatory enforcement, the dearth of affordable housing, and the broadening and deepening of poverty are among the most important consequences of the squeezing of governments, it would appear that a whole generation of high-achieving students — and the institutions they are *not* serving — may belong on the victim list, too.

Large finance and consulting firms have been especially good at attracting talented students from elite colleges. “It is definitely not necessarily that the ‘smartest’ at [elite] institutions go to Wall Street,” but that these industries have “saturate[d] the space of the ‘next step,’” according to Karen Ho, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and author of the book, “Liquidity: An Ethnography of Wall Street.”

“If you look at which students go to Wall Street, it is often those who are undecided,” she added.

Ho said that through aggressive on-campus recruiting, firms cultivate the sense among their potential employees that “Goldman [Sachs] is the Harvard of Wall Street...and so, in order to continue Harvard after Harvard...the only thing you can do is go to Goldman [Sachs]. Very few institutions have been able to make that link.”

Unlike governmental employers, “The KPMG recruiter...is there knocking on their door, or the CitiBank recruiter... is there kind of pinching them.” — Steve Ressler

Remapping Debate contacted nearly a dozen large, well-known consulting, finance, and technology firms to inquire about the importance of their recruiting process in attracting talented new graduates. Most declined to comment or did not return repeated requests for interviews.

Goldman Sachs did respond to emailed questions. Its representative wrote back that part of its success in recruiting new graduates lay in the firm’s ability to show to students that they offer both “a long-term career platform” and “world class training and professional development” that “often lays the groundwork for any career path, which is important to many of our candidates.”

Being able to offer both practical opportunities for advancement and training that can be transferred to other jobs should a new worker (or the firm) choose to end the employment, is, of course, attractive. Ultimately, “the finance industry and the consulting industry...do a really good job of actually branding themselves as being a really great place to work,” said Tim McManus, the vice president for education and outreach at the Partnership for Public Service, an organization that promotes public service through government employment.

“They spend a lot of time on campuses,” McManus said.

Travis Lovett, the director of Harvard University’s Center for Public Interest Careers, told Remapping Debate that finance jobs “are highly competitive positions. When you introduce [the] element of competition to a group of students who have been used to competing for various things...up through high school and into college. That element of competition — whether it’s real or artificial — creates a sense of prestige.”

In addition to cultivating a sense of the prestigious nature of getting a job in these industries, Lovett added that “what we have found with working with students is that [part of] the lure of finance and consulting...is that students go through a clear recruiting process.”

Andrew Simmons agreed. The director of Brown University’s Center for Careers and Life After Brown (CareerLAB), Simmons told Remapping Debate, “the finance group...[has] a certain structure to it that looks appealing, because they come to campus, they do formal recruiting. It seems more straightforward than what a traditional job hunt would otherwise be like.”

“The way it works on our campus,” Simmons said, is “you can come to our center, and you can do on-campus interviewing, and you post your job through our searchable database. You can run info sessions, and you can also attend career fairs.” In addition, however, “a lot of these entities will also have developed relationships in other places on campus, either through student ambassadors who have been interns with those companies, or perhaps with course instructors...so it works on the radar and a little bit below the radar.”

“The big banking and consulting firms, and maybe Teach for America, are the ones who engage with this the most, and the big technology firms as well,” he added.

A clear path

When it comes to filling out an application, the “the process is very easy...[human resources departments] make applying to financial services look like applying to college in such a way that it seems like a logical next step,” said Chris Wiggins, an associate professor in the Department of Applied Physics and Applied Mathematics at Columbia University.

Not all of the activity that draws students to these sectors takes place in the final months before graduation. As Karen Ho told Remapping Debate, though many students may have a dim view of finance before entering college, students “are pretty much bombarded when [they] start [their] freshman year,” both by the campus culture and events hosted by campus clubs, or by advertisements in campus newspapers.

“That element of competition — whether it’s real or artificial — creates a sense of prestige.”
— Travis Lovett

More directly influential, said Tim McManus, is the role that summer internships for undergraduates play in getting students interested in particular companies or economic sectors early in their academic careers: Finance firms “get the students early as well. So they are not waiting to try to get those students until they are a junior or senior when it is actually time to start thinking about a job, they are actually trying to get to students earlier in their college careers so that they are actually setting the path forward.”

Companies say, “Come and work for us for a summer: You are going to find out first hand what it is like to work in this industry,” McManus said.

Indeed, Goldman Sachs told Remapping Debate, its Summer Internship Program is “the key feeder” for its “full-time analyst and associate roles.” The program allows Goldman to “evaluate talent,” but also for undergraduate interns to “determine if the firm is a place where they want to build their careers over the long term.”

Collectively, these recruiting efforts have paid off for financial services and consulting firms. At Harvard, for example, 22 percent of surveyed graduating seniors had found employment in finance or consulting in 2012. By contrast, just 5 percent of students planned to enter “government, military service, [a] non-profit agency, or NGO,” a number that does not include education.

What about the path (currently) less traveled?

“To the extent that these students come with broad training, enthusiasm, resources...[and] can bring these tools to bear on the new institution they are a part of,” said Karen Ho, “why shouldn’t government institutions take advantage of that?”

A 2011 survey of college students — conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers and subsequently [analyzed by the Partnership for Public Service](#) — showed that only 6 percent were planning on working for local, state, or the federal governments. (Just 2.3 percent planned on entering the federal workforce.) It is plain, said Philip D. Gardner, the director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, “Government is not necessarily the employer of first choice unless that is the only place you can go” given your career field (as in forestry or geology, for example).

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— Andrew Simmons

One reason that new graduates haven’t flocked to government, said Steve Ressler, the founder of Gov-Loop, an online community for government employees that has also co-published an 88-page online guide entitled “[Getting into Government: A Guide for High Achievers](#),” “is that they really don’t know about it. The average, smart 21-year-old coming out of SUNY-Albany doesn’t even know how the State of New York government works, or how to get a job at the City of Albany. And honestly, even if they tried, it is probably very complicated, confusing, and bureaucratic, which makes it hard for them to consider.”

On the other hand, he added, “The KPMG recruiter...is there knocking on their door, or the CitiBank recruiter...is there kind of pinching them.”

Lovett, the director of Harvard’s Center for Public Interest Careers agreed. “The biggest challenge from what I’ve seen, and from our interactions with different government organizations, is that there is not a really great process for entry level hiring in the public sector.”

Though saying “some government agencies do come to campus specifically to hire seniors,” Lovett added, “there isn’t a great pipeline for really talented grads...part of that is because of the decentralization of government...[and] that processes aren’t consistent throughout.”

Relatively little of the work that Lovett does with Harvard undergraduates at the Center for Public Interest Careers is helping students connect with government employment. Instead, Lovett said that about 85 to 95 percent of the work he does at the Center is helping students interested in public service make connections to non-profit agencies.

“Government recruitment and hiring,” Tim McManus, at the Partnership for Public Service, said, “doesn’t operate on a corporate level across government, it is really the responsibility and the work of individual agencies, so you do see huge variability in the way that folks recruit and hire.”

Though several people Remapping Debate spoke with lauded the efforts of federal agencies like the National Security Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in recruiting top college graduates, sources also acknowledged that many other agencies do not take “proactive” approaches to recruiting.

Not a new issue

Such passivity is a long-standing concern of the federal government itself. Worried about whether it was attracting enough talented new college graduates, a 1988 U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board report to President Reagan titled, [“Attracting Quality Graduates to the Federal Government: A View of College Recruiting,”](#) summed up the problem.

The report, which surveyed “selected college and university deans and placement officials” on students’ attitudes about the federal government, confirmed that “the Government is not perceived as an ‘employer of choice’ by many graduates of some of the country’s most highly rated academic institutions.”

Additionally, the report found “little active encouragement on the part of most Federal agencies” concerning potential career opportunities and “little or no on-campus recruitment.”

Tim McManus at the Partnership for Public Service told Remapping Debate that through “some movement has been made...it is still a difficult process to understand, and I think that there is more that can be done to make it a little bit more transparent.” At a hearing before a U.S. House subcommittee charged with federal workforce oversight, in June 2011, McManus submitted a statement that called for the government to make agency leaders more accountable for recruiting, hiring, and talent development, as well as for the collecting and public reporting of data on the hiring process, including applicant satisfaction.

Even for students who know they are interested in pursuing government service, said Lynne Sebill-White, the senior assistant director of employer relations at the University of Michigan’s Career Center, “the biggest roadblock...is learning how to speak government speak and being able to navigate the USAjobs website...so that students who are interested in [government] understand the roadmap to get there, because it is different than corporate postings.”

OBAMA ADMINISTRATION EFFORTS

Since 2010, President Obama has issued Executive Orders and memoranda that have streamlined the federal job application process for all applicants, including college students.

“USAjobs.gov,” the federal government’s online job portal through which all federal jobs are posted, has been changed to make the application process more similar to that of the private sector, with applicants most often submitting a cover letter and resume, instead of answering short essays.

Additionally, several existing programs for encouraging young people to participate in government — including the “Career Intern” program and the “Presidential Management Fellows Program” — have been placed under a “Pathways” program, which allows students to search for opportunities at these programs with more ease.

Further streamlining the application process and increasing the presence of government on college campuses, Steve Ressler told Remapping Debate, are things that ought to be “really easy...to do.”

The promise of making these changes, he added, “is that if you made it clear and simple about how to apply, you would get a ton of great candidates.”

Not just about process

“Clearly,” said Tim McManus, of the Partnership for Public Service, new graduates are actually looking to understand “how is this opportunity giving me continual growth...and where is this opportunity going to lead me,” both in terms of skill development and career advancement. The question is, said McManus, “is this something that agencies are addressing in a meaningful way?”

“Clearly,” said Tim McManus, new grads are actually looking to understand “how is this opportunity giving me continual growth...and where is this opportunity going to lead me,” both in terms of skill development and career advancement.

“There are pockets” of federal agencies, he said, that are communicating to college students, throughout their recruiting process — from position descriptions in job ads, to in-person conversations as part of on campus recruiting, and then in interviews — the ways that new hires have an opportunity to learn new skills and articulate where they can be in three to five years. McManus cited the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau as an example of an agency doing this process well.

Still, McManus said, “there are too many agencies that are looking at [hiring] not from the applicant perspective, but...solely from the employer perspective, which is ‘here is the work you are going to do,’ without being able to articulate ‘and here is what you personally are going to get from this as a result, whether or not you use those skills with us in the long term [or take them to another employer].”

Alongside articulating the potential for career growth and skill development, McManus said that “part of bringing back the prestige and bringing back the fact that it is both cool and really important to consider working for the federal government, you have to be branding yourself as somebody who is highly selective” in order to help attract talented new graduates.

Though McManus agreed that branding this prestige is something that the “government needs to do a better job of,” he pointed to the Presidential Management Fellows Program as an example of a prestigious program already in place at the federal level. The program, which is designed for new graduates with graduate degrees, not bachelors degree holders, attracted over 12,000 applicants last year and accepted just 663 to interview with particular agencies. (Most, but not all of these finalists will find jobs with federal agencies.)

Ultimately, McManus said, “If you are saying at the front end, this is highly competitive. It is not easy to get in. That actually makes some of the process impediments more understandable. And you are willing to endure it as an applicant because, ultimately, you know what they are trying to do is get the absolute best person in the door.”

Local governments lag further

In comparison to local and state recruitment, Rob Carty told Remapping Debate that though it has many agencies, “The federal government is easy because it is big. It is one employer.” Carty, the director of career services and next generation initiatives at the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), cited census figures that show that, depending on how you count them, there are between 38,000 and 90,000 local governments in the U.S., “and they are all different companies if you think about it.”

Michael Rocco, the executive director of City Hall Fellows, a non-profit organization that partners with cities and places new college graduates in their workforce for one year, focused his concern on the impact of the fiscal environment of the last several years.

“It is fair to say that, particularly under the economic times that we’ve faced, that it has been difficult for local government — or really any level of government — to prioritize recruiting, specifically with an eye for the next generation, while we’ve got so many other dire needs that need to be funded,” Rocco said.

A 2011 survey of college students showed that only 6 percent were planning on working for local, state, or the federal governments.

The ICMA does sponsor two “next generation” initiatives aimed at bringing young people into government (both as summer interns and as fellows), but Carty noted, “these are drops in the bucket” in terms of the number of students and graduates they involve, compared with the size of government.

In addition to Michael Rocco’s City Hall Fellows, and the initiatives of the ICMA, a handful of other cities also have selective year-long fellowships in city government, most notably in New York City, where the Urban Fellows program has been in place, and drawing between 20 and 30 fellows since the Lindsay Administration. Still, as Steve Ressler said, “Your average city or state doesn’t have [such programs].”

Replicable practices?

The variability in government efforts at recruiting high-achieving students has produced some examples of programs where prestige and clear processes *have* attracted top graduates.

When asked which government organizations or entities cooperating with governments were successfully connecting high achieving students (and graduates) with the public sector, those interviewed by Remapping Debate consistently mentioned the efforts of Teach for America (TFA) and the Peace Corps, along with agencies in the national security apparatus, including the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Over time, “Teach for America basically did the best marketing job of all time,” said Steve Ressler of GovLoop, “They made it somehow cool to teach in rural Alabama or inner-city Chicago...For decades schools couldn’t fill these jobs and now...the best and brightest apply for this.”

Steve Mancini, a spokesperson for TFA, told Remapping Debate that there is certainly “a cachet about being part of Teach for America. It is highly selective, and [participants] will be part of something greater than [themselves].” Additionally, he said, “it is very clear what we are looking for [in applications],” and this “process could also be a factor” in Teach for America’s success.

Andrew Simmons, at Brown University’s CareerLAB, said of TFA’s application process: “It looks a little bit more like when [students] applied to college. There [are] some criteria that look a little more clear. And there is some structure to it that they can connect with.”

That strategy has paid off. It had a record 57,000 applicants in 2013, an 18 percent increase over 2012. And it is highly competitive: just 15 percent of applicants are accepted.

“Our biggest challenge...
is getting a local city to
commit to fund people.”
— Michael Rocco

Such interest in the organization did not happen overnight. Mancini said that attracting this many applicants was something that “took place over time” as the result of the persistence of its staff. Teach for America recruiters, he said, “became very good about getting people interested in the mission...and have constantly recalibrated in how to get the word out [about the program].”

Though the program does not rely on summer internships for undergraduates, the way that many consulting and finance industry firms do, Mancini said that Teach for America now holds meetings on campus for first year and sophomore students to “increase awareness both of Teach for America and about education” and has now created a pilot program for allowing students committed to joining the organization to apply during the spring of their junior year in college (to join the organization after graduating).

Teach for America, Mancini said, is an organization that “promotes leadership development” and communicates that to its applicants, telling them that they have an opportunity to make an impact both inside classrooms and outside classrooms after they complete their two-year commitment to TFA.

Tim McManus, at the Partnership for Public Service, said that such an emphasis on honing leadership is attractive for college grads. “What we have found,” he said, is that “the opportunity to grow and develop” is “most attractive to college and university students.”

Teach for America’s recruiting process also relies on current and former TFA teachers interacting with candidates on campuses. McManus, speaking to Remapping Debate about best practices in attracting students, said such a strategy is important because they “can actually bring their own experience to the table. It is not just ‘here is what I do,’ but ‘here is what I’ve learned,’ and ‘here is what I’ve developed along the way,’ and ‘here is where I am now.’”

Such persistent recruiting and simplified process are not only the province of Teach for America. The Peace Corps currently has 8,000 volunteers in service. In an email responding to questions from Remapping Debate, a Peace Corps spokesperson wrote that the organization uses campus recruiters, social media, and a network of faculty members, student organizations, and program alumni to recruit on campus. It also, the spokesperson said, has recently simplified the application process, so that applicants can track their progress through each stage of the process.

The challenge: being more proactive, generating more cooperation

When it comes to recruiting, said Steve Condrey, the president of the American Society for Public Administration, state and local government have traditionally been more passive. “Part of the solution is to be a bit more active” in recruiting, he said. “But then again,” Condrey added, “public agencies don’t have the budget for recruitment.”

Kristin Conner, an assistant director at Stanford University’s Career Development Center, told Remapping Debate that a recruiting strategy that “makes sense for government,” especially for smaller, local governments, would be to work cooperatively with other governments to “create a more powerful punch on a campus in reaching out to students.” This would allow them to have a larger presence on campus than would be possible on their own, she said.

She cautioned, however, “if they don’t have any opportunities,” then such a marketing push could “create sort of a negative reaction, because if you constantly have students coming at your organization saying I want to work for you, and they say, ‘oh I’m sorry we aren’t hiring right now,’ that doesn’t help.”

Some of this cooperation is already underway in isolated cases. Both Stanford’s Conner and ICMA’s Rob Carty referenced a program in northern California where the county governments of San Mateo and Santa Clara have cooperated in created a [common portal](#) for summer internships and job opportunities across the region for young people.

It is easy to imagine that the decision *not* to invest in making government service a first choice for more students is powerfully consequential.

Frank Benest, a former city manager in Palo Alto, California has been instrumental in the establishment of this “Next Gen Silicon Valley” initiative. He said that though it was important to make the process simpler (through their one application and job portal), advertising the ability for career advancement and skill development is also crucial for attracting graduates.

Benest said a big part of the battle in attracting new talent is in “branding” local government as a place “where you can make a difference in your own backyard,” and in accentuating the “learning, growth, and challenges of our job.”

“I think...this regional program in California has a lot of potential,” Carty said, “but, if a group of universities wanted to get together and create the one [application]” that any government organization “could tap into...that would be a great service for everybody.”

Ultimately, for Andrew Simmons, the Brown University Center for Careers director, “What I would say to government is what I would say to any employer, which is the more straightforward your process, the more structured your process, the more out in the open it is, and the more you come in and talk to students, the better your outcomes are going to be.”

The funding squeeze

Several people who Remapping Debate spoke with pointed out that state and local budget cuts — which according to the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York at Albany have resulted in over 680,000 job losses since 2008 — remain a central challenge for local government actively encouraging new graduates to seek employment in this sector.

“Our biggest challenge [at City Hall Fellows],” said that organization’s Michael Rocco, “is getting a local city to commit to fund people...but American government just has not been in a financial position to really say, ‘Yes, let’s invest for ten years down the road when these [new graduates] are rising up to the level of either senior staff or department heads.’”

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