

Call to Serve Workshop Series

----Security Clearances----

Wednesday, September 26, 2007

Questions:

- [What are the different types of clearances?](#)
- [What is the timeline for obtaining a security clearance?](#)
- [Knowing that security clearances sometimes take time, how far in advance should a student plan on applying for a job?](#)
- [Are there some background factors that students may have that should lead them not to even consider a position that requires security clearance \(drug use, criminal background, living abroad\)?](#)
- [Are international students eligible for any positions which require security clearances?](#)
- [Are students with dual citizenship able to obtain security clearances?](#)
- [What kinds of information do other agencies have access to? For instance, if a student fails to obtain a clearance from the CIA, can other agencies have access to the information contained in the CIA's background check file?](#)
- [What should a person do while they wait to obtain a security clearance?](#)
- [At what point in the process is the applicant given status updates?](#)
- [What kind of advice should university staff be giving to freshman many years before they begin looking for jobs that may require a security clearance?](#)
- [What kind of infractions are looked at?](#)
- [Should students be concerned about their medical records?](#)
- [One of our students was denied a security clearance due to debt. Is there a threshold at which someone is ineligible to obtain a clearance?](#)
- [Are there any major trends or issues you are seeing in the clearance process?](#)
- [Should students be careful with what they are putting in online profiles, such as facebook?](#)
- [Are there any web resources available to help students navigate the security clearances process?](#)
- [Do agencies rely on polygraphs, and, if so, which ones?](#)
- [How does international travel affect a student obtaining a security clearance?](#)
- [How do clearances transfer between agencies?](#)
- [Can the background investigation report go from one agency to another?](#)

Introduction

Most summer internships and entry-level jobs (including those for recent graduates) that require a security clearance have deadlines in November. Make sure your students are prepared to successfully navigate the process. Join us for this discussion with security clearance experts from federal agencies.

Panelists include:

- Jim Onusko- Director at the Office of Personnel Security & Suitability with the State Department

- Kathy Dillaman- Associate Director at the Federal Investigative Services Division of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)

Kathy notes that OPM conducts the background investigations used to support the security clearances of various agencies. OPM provides these services to over 100 agencies. Over two million people come into contact with the government and require some level of screening that goes through her office. Kathy clarifies that *clearances* are not granted by OPM, however, the background check is handled by OPM and the agency determines finally if the applicant will be granted a clearance.

Jim notes that his is one of those agencies that OPM supports security clearances for. He notes that his team conducts over 26,000 security clearances per year and they do their own background checks and adjudication. He notes that a good place to look for more information is www.careers.state.gov The process begins with sending a request form to the applicant ([Standard Form 86](#)), which is essentially a personal history statement with questions related to where the applicant has lived, worked, went to school, etc. Jim notes that results of the background investigation are being adjudicated for suitability for employment. He gives the example that if the individual is applying for a job as a driver, if they have a series of moving violations, they would not be able to perform the duties of a driver. Therefore, they would most likely not receive a security clearance. His agency is looking for: loyalty, trustworthiness, and ability to use good judgment.

Questions & Answers

What are the different types of clearances?

Kathy notes that not all positions in government require security clearances. It will depend if a student is interested in a position of:

1. [National Security](#) (top secret, secret, confidential levels of clearances)
2. [Public Trust](#) (low-risk, moderate-risk, high-risk)
3. Non-sensitive (minimum background check- i.e. criminal background and credit check)

She encourages students to check out www.usajobs.gov to look and see what kind of jobs they are interested in and notes that approximately 25,000 jobs are available at any given time.

What is the timeline for obtaining a security clearance?

Kathy notes that at least 80% of security clearances are completed in [90 days or less](#). Some clearances are completed more quickly because of the limited scope of someone's background (for instance, they have not moved around a lot or had numerous previous jobs, etc.). If someone has moved around a lot, had many previous employers, and is applying for a high-level position, the clearance process will likely take longer as many people will have to be interviewed and it will depend on how quickly the interviewers can arrange time to meet with the applicant's contacts.

Jim notes that at the State Department, foreign service jobs require top secret clearance. However, other civil service positions run the gamut from medium risk to secret. He notes that the timeline for the State Department is similar to what Kathy described.

Knowing that security clearances sometimes take time, how far in advance should a student plan on applying for a job?

Kathy notes that most positions fall under a 45 day hiring model, where the job will be posted and the agency will have made a decision within 6 weeks. She notes that, in some positions, some people can start their job before all elements of the background check have been completed. She does *not* suggest that people begin applying months in advance and she recommends that people assume they will be starting to interview within 6 weeks of applying for a position.

Jim notes that the State Department is currently [accepting internship applications](#) for next spring , so students do want to keep an eye on deadlines fairly far in advance, especially for internship positions.

Both panelists recommended that students prepare ahead of time. For example, students can do research on what kind of positions they are interested in, what agencies they would like to work for, etc.

Heather from Dickinson College asks, “Are there some background factors that students may have that should lead them not to even consider a position that requires security clearance (drug use, criminal background, living abroad)?”

Panelists note that there are very few automatic disqualifiers. Things that will be considered include how frequently the incident occurred, what has happened since, etc. The background check is based on the concept of the whole person, in that, all background factors will be considered. For example, drug use a year ago does not automatically disqualify an applicant. Unless there is a stated statutory disqualification listed in the job posting (for example, it may be posted that an applicant for a law enforcement position may not have had a felony conviction).

Panelists highlight the most important part of the process is to be *truthful* and to self-disclose.

Liz from Wellesley College asks, “Are international students eligible for any positions which require security clearances?”

The basic answer to this question is “no.” Only naturalized citizens are eligible to apply for positions. In the case of a naturalized US citizen, Jim notes that they will look at such things as the person’s allegiance to the United States, foreign influences (for example, family members still living abroad), foreign preference, the way the applicant handles their citizenship (are they voting in US elections, for example). Jim notes that the investigators will look at all the circumstances of the whole individual.

Are students with dual citizenship able to obtain security clearances?

Again, the investigators will look at the ties the student has with their secondary citizenship and ask questions such as: Which country does this person show loyalty towards? Are they voting? Do they own property here or in the other country? What kind of relatives do they have in the other country (is their

father a high-ranking official in the intelligence community there)? Do they have a foreign passport and, if so, why? Kathy notes that the applicant may be asked to renounce their secondary citizenship as part of the clearance process.

Jennifer from the University of Michigan asks, "What kinds of information do other agencies have access to? For instance, if a student fails to obtain a clearance from the CIA, can other agencies have access to the information contained in the CIA's background check file?"

Jim answers that yes, generally agencies have access to information obtained from other agencies.

Jennifer also asks, "What if a student withdraws from the security clearance process because they think they will not obtain clearance? Is this looked at unfavorably or weighted differently?"

Kathy notes that it is not the action that affects obtaining a clearance. The final determination is based on the background investigation and the facts identified through that investigation.

What should a person do while they wait to obtain a security clearance? Should they take another job?

Jim notes that the amount of time it takes to obtain a clearance will depend on the completeness of the application. So a student who wants to make sure the process goes as quickly as possible can take time to fill out the background information quickly and accurately. For example, if you had a job a few years ago and just write down the name of your supervisor and phone number, your former supervisor may not work there any longer. Additionally, the number to your place of work may have changed. These small things can add a lot of extra time onto the job of the folks doing the background check.

Panelists note that some positions have an interim clearance potential to them. For example, after beginning the background check, it may be determined that the applicant is a good risk and can be brought into the agency to begin their job until the full clearance is granted. Kathy notes that this will vary depending on the agency one is applying to. She encourages applicants to have a discussion with the Human Resources office in the agency they are applying to. The HR person will be able to talk to the applicant about possible delays in the process and what the applicant can expect as far as an interim position or a timeline for processing.

Danny from the College of Charleston asks, "At what point in the process is the applicant given status updates? Or are they just informed at the very end of the process?"

Kathy says that the applicant will have interactions with the employing agency throughout the process. For example, if a student is applying for top secret clearance, the first step in the process is having an agent ask the applicant questions. Therefore, the student will be aware that the background check process is beginning.

Jim notes that at the State Department, they have a customer service center. The applicant is given a 1-800 number and an email address to contact if they have any questions throughout the process and to check on the status of their clearance.

What kind of advice should university staff be giving to freshman many years before they begin looking for jobs that may require a security clearance?

Jim notes that the forms they will need to fill out are online and it would be a great idea to begin writing down/collecting some of the information. For instance, all previous addresses (and dates they lived there), previous employers, and supervisors are something that a student could begin making sure they have all that information.

He notes that truthfulness is SO KEY to processing the clearance in an efficient way. So, remind students that issues of alcohol or drug use or some incident where they were detained by police will not be as big of issues as *lying* or omitting the fact these instances occurred. The investigators will look to see what has happened since these occurrences, so university staff can encourage students to be proactive in doing good things, even though they may have had an incident with the law in high school or early college.

Kathy says to remind freshman to keep their records clean while in college. She also notes it is super important to keep good credit. So, encourage students to monitor their spending habits throughout college as this will be something that will be taken into account.

Could the panelists elaborate on credit history and how this factors into obtaining a security clearance?

Kathy notes that really bad credit can be seen as a risk. It shows that a student is not living up to their obligations/contracts (in the case of not making minimum payments on a credit card, for instance).

What kind of infractions are looked at? Drug and alcohol violations? Being detained by local or campus police? What about on campus violations?

Panelists note that all of the above are looked at. Not just things that students are arrested for are looked at in the background check. An applicant's *conduct* generally is being taken into account. Again, it is important for a student to be truthful in disclosing all possible violations and then the student's whole background will be taken into account when making a decision.

Marie from the University of Albany asks, "One of my students was turned down by the Marines for medical reasons. Might this affect his obtaining a security clearance with, say, the FBI?"

Panelists note that if the job that the student is applying has a certain level of physical requirements to carry out the job, then, yes, this might affect the student obtaining the job with the FBI. However, if there are not necessary physical requirements to carry out the job, then this will not affect this student obtaining a security clearance with the FBI.

Tosha from the University of Oklahoma asks, "Should students be concerned about their medical records?"

First of all, students should self-disclose any information they think the agency should be aware of. However, because of HIPPA, the agency will not be allowed to access that information.

Seeking counseling should not concern students as background investigators view seeking help in a positive light, especially grief or marital counseling.

The Privacy Act declares that information can only be used for the purpose collected so information collected for security clearances can only be used for this or other security clearance applications.

JT from the University of Denver asks, "One of our students was denied a security clearance due to debt. Is there a threshold at which someone is ineligible to obtain a clearance?"

Jim notes that what investigators are looking for in the background check is for financial irresponsibility. They are looking at the debt to income ratio. It is understandable that someone will have a student loan and not have a job right after graduation and they view student loans as a necessary part of advancing one's career. What they are looking for is, is a student living beyond their means (large amounts of credit card debt)? Are they using bad judgment? Are they living up to their responsibilities?

Kathy adds that if someone is denied for reasons of debt, they can start on the path to correcting their debt. This applicant is not disqualified for the rest of their life. They can begin paying off their debt responsibly and if they can show progression in this way, they can reapply for the job. Also, some applicants can come onto jobs on probationary status, whereby they are expected to begin correcting their debt and the agency will run, say, credit checks every 6 months. These applicants can be let go at the end of their probationary period if they are not showing that they are not living up to the conditions of the probationary period.

Karen from the University of California in Pennsylvania asks, "What about student loan debt in particular?"

Jim notes that they are going to look at student debt more favorably than credit card debt, for instance. They are not there to penalize applicants for what they consider to be a normal process of progressing in their careers. Kathy adds that they just expect that the student is living up to their end of the contract (i.e. that they are making timely payments if they are in the repayment period).

Liz from Wellesley asks, "Are there any major trends or issues you are seeing in the clearance process?"

Kathy notes that they are not seeing a lot of changes except maybe in the areas of information technology (IT). Jim adds that drugs, alcohol, and financial issues are at the top of the list. He adds on to the IT comment by noting that when conducting background investigations, they may talk to former coworkers and supervisors and find out that an applicant was accessing unauthorized websites, for example. These websites may make the company vulnerable to viruses and thus, this conduct will be taken into account when determining if the applicant is trustworthy.

Carol from Ohio State asks, "Should students be careful with what they are putting in online profiles, such as facebook?"

Yes, Kathy notes that these profiles can certainly come back to haunt students if they are not careful with what they put on public websites. She reminds folks that private companies and organizations, not just the government, will take these into account when making hiring decisions.

Are there any web resources available to help students navigate the security clearances process?

Check out the security clearances factsheet on www.makingthedifference.org. Additionally, Kathy notes that there is information contained in the executive order that mandates security clearances. Students can read these to learn more about adjudication guidelines.

Jennifer from the University of Michigan asks, "Do agencies rely on polygraphs, and, if so, which ones?"

Jim notes that any major federal investigative agency uses them. His best advice would be to talk to the personnel officer working with the applicant to determine which kind of polygraph is administered for a particular agency and position. Overall, they are looking for honesty so it is best always to be truthful.

Kathy notes that use of polygraphs is probably limited to agencies that engage in counter-intelligence such as the CIA or FBI.

How does international travel affect a student obtaining a security clearance?

Kathy notes that students should self-disclose all international travel and especially the purpose of that travel. She notes that a 1 week trip to Mexico, for instance, would not be a problem. However, if a student spent 3 months abroad and forgot to mention it, that might have to be explored further.

Jim notes they also particularly look at the reason for the travel. Sometimes agents check with local government police or the school abroad to make sure the applicant did not violate any laws while abroad.

How do clearances transfer between agencies?

Kathy notes that reciprocity does apply. So, if you are moving from top secret clearance to top secret clearance, you would not have to start at zero. However, it will depend on if there is a break in service. So if someone had top secret clearance at one agency, took another job for 2 years, and then applied for a job at another agency, the agency would need to investigate the period of time in between jobs. She notes that you can even change sensitivities and not have to start at zero.

Can the background investigation report go from one agency to another?

Kathy notes that it depends. If a person is working at one agency and now wants to transfer over to another agency with the same level of security clearance, the new agency will most likely be able to use the clearance without seeing the file.

Jim provides the example that if someone receives security clearance for a job that does not require driving, and now they are applying for a job that requires driving, it will require the agency to review the file for any information related to driving records. Jim clarifies that if there were unique suitability concerns (for example, driving), the hiring agency would request to review the entire file from the previous background check.