



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

## **TAPPING AMERICA'S POTENTIAL:**

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*EXPANDING STUDENT EMPLOYMENT AND INTERNSHIP  
OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT*

A Preliminary Report by:  
*The Partnership for Public Service*  
July 10, 2002

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The federal government needs to hire over a quarter of a million highly qualified, diverse, and motivated new employees over the next two years—and it needs to overcome some major obstacles to do so successfully. Along with the challenges, however, are some valuable opportunities. Each year a great many students—over 50,000 in FY 2001—work in various federal agencies under several different student employment or internship programs. Collectively, they provide an excellent and diverse talent pool, which can be closely observed by supervisors in real-life workplace settings before hiring decisions are made. Yet relatively few are drawn from that pool into permanent federal jobs. The recruitment of these students is an opportunity that the government can ill afford to let slip away. This report discusses why temporary student employees and interns are such a valuable recruitment source, why the federal government doesn't make better use of this source, and what can be done about it.*

## BACKGROUND

Over the next two years, the federal government will need to hire more than 250,000 employees both to replace highly experienced workers across government who will retire or resign and to carry out new responsibilities for homeland security. Given the vital importance of the many missions the government carries out on behalf of the nation, and changing demographics in the national labor force, the new hires must be highly skilled, diverse, and motivated to perform public service.

A major source of needed talent should be new college graduates, but many students simply do not have access to information about jobs in government. Further, even when graduating students express an interest in working for the government, they often find the hiring process confusing and discouraging.

One potential bright spot in this rather somber picture is the fact that each year the federal government hires literally tens of thousands of students in temporary employment or intern programs. In FY 2001 alone, well over 50,000 high school and college students worked in various federal agencies under several different programs—up from 34,578 just five years ago. One of the best methods for assessing a student's capabilities and aptitude is to observe their actual on-the-job performance. In fact, one of the major federal programs for temporary student employees recognizes the value of the on-the-job experience by allowing graduating students to be offered permanent federal jobs without further competition.

## FINDINGS

Unfortunately, relatively few interns and other student employees end up taking permanent federal jobs, especially in comparison to the private sector, in which internships are used as a

major recruitment source. Even among those students who are eligible for non-competitive conversion to permanent employment upon successful completion of their internships, only about 13 to 17 percent a year receive and accept federal job offers—versus more than 35 percent of interns in the private sector who accept jobs with the companies for which they interned. There are several interrelated reasons for this disparity:

- Many federal agencies fail to incorporate student employment or internship programs into their strategic planning about how to meet future workforce needs of the agency.
- Most student employment arrangements offer little or no structural connection between the temporary employment and future federal job opportunities. The main programs for student employment are:
  1. The Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP),
  2. The highly structured Student Career Experience Program (SCEP),
  3. Internships and student employment opportunities arranged by third-party organizations, such as the non-profit Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) and The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars.

Of the three methods, only the SCEP offers a vehicle (conversion) to expedite consideration of high-performing students for permanent employment. Unfortunately, students hired under the STEP program or through third party organizations constitute the large majority of interns who serve in temporary employment opportunities. Very few of these individuals join the federal government as permanent hires, in part because they lack a mechanism for conversion.

- Many highly qualified students lack easily accessible information about student employment or internship opportunities.
- Under the federal government's highly decentralized approach to recruiting and hiring, there is often little sharing of information among federal agencies with regard to highly successful student employment and intern programs. In addition, there is little sharing of information among agencies regarding high potential students who might be excellent job candidates upon graduation from their internship.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1. Federal agencies should specifically include student employment programs in their strategic workforce planning efforts as a talent pool for future permanent hires, and should allocate resources accordingly.**

- 2. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) should modify the current regulations governing Student Educational Employment Programs to assist agencies in making better use of this talent pool.**
- 3. Federal agencies, OPM, and other organizations providing student employment and internship opportunities in the federal government need to cooperate in improving the visibility and availability of information regarding those opportunities.**
- 4. OPM, in partnership with federal agencies and other organizations, should gather and disseminate “best practices” for recruiting and using interns and other temporary student employees.**
- 5. The Administration should seek broad support and collaboration from all stakeholders in developing options for improving the strategic use of student employment and intern programs.**

These findings and recommendations are discussed in more detail in the body of this preliminary report.

## **INTERNSHIPS: A VALUABLE, AND TESTED, POOL OF RECRUITS**

As the federal workforce ages, bringing talented and motivated young people into public service has become a necessity for practically all government agencies. With the looming workforce crisis—more than 50 percent of the federal employees may be eligible to retire in the next five years—the government has begun re-establishing ties with universities across the nation. Agencies are trying to create work environments that are attractive to “Generation X” and “Y” employees, while returning to college campuses that they have largely abandoned since the early 1990s. Amid these efforts to bring young people back to government, federal employers should not overlook one of the most powerful and productive recruitment strategies: internships.

At one time, internships were merely a way for students to gain first-hand experience in the working world. Today, however, they are a primary means of contact between students and potential employers. Private sector companies maintain internship programs as part of larger recruiting plans, and students often accept full time jobs with last summer's employer. While the federal government has a well-established student employment program allowing agencies to hire students directly into permanent federal jobs, the government still lags behind the private sector in taking full advantage of the internships as a recruiting pipeline.

Yet, effective and well-planned recruiting is becoming increasingly critical for the federal government. Projections show that the government will need to hire over 250,000 new recruits over the next two years.<sup>1</sup> At all levels of government, agencies will be looking to fill positions with newly-minted college graduates, professionals, and PhDs. Separate studies have also predicted expanding workforce needs in specific fields. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the government will see an expansion in the information technology (IT) arena, necessitating 16,000 more IT workers over the next ten years.<sup>2</sup> The General Accounting Office (GAO) estimates that, as foreign language intelligence priorities shift, the government will need more experts in Asian and Middle Eastern languages.<sup>3</sup>

Compounding these problems, the United States' labor pool will shift as the baby boom generation ages. Between 1980 and 2000 the U.S. labor market expanded by 35 million people as the baby boom generation entered the “prime age workforce” (employees between 25 and 54 years old). In contrast, between 2000 and 2020 the prime age workforce will only grow by 3 million people.<sup>4</sup> The make-up of the overall labor force will also change dramatically,

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<sup>1</sup> The Office of Personnel Management projects that over 120,000 federal employees will retire in the next two years. Accounting for normal attrition rates (in 2001 alone there were 89,668 resignations) and the President's 2003 budget request for a net increase of 63,000 federal civilian workers, the projection exceeds 250,000.

<sup>2</sup> Testimony of Martin Faga, President and CEO of the MITRE Corporation and a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, Hearing on “Public Service for the Twenty-First Century: Innovative Solutions to the Federal Government's Technology Workforce Crisis,” Subcommittee on Technology and Procurement Policy, July 31, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, January 2002, General Accounting Office.

<sup>4</sup> David T. Ellwood, *The Sputtering Labor Force of the 21st Century: Can Social Policy Help?*, June 2001, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, W8321, pp. 3-4.

particularly as Hispanic representation increases from 10.9 percent of the workforce in 2000 to 13.3 percent in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, it is also imperative to note that the government has not realized the full potential of internships in creating a diverse workforce. Though the government has made great strides over the years, Hispanics remain under-represented in the federal ranks when compared to the U.S. civilian labor force. Only 6.7 percent of the federal workforce is Hispanic, compared to 11.9 percent of the civilian workforce. By more fully utilizing internship programs, the government could expand its minority outreach and recruitment.

In recruiting all employees, however, agencies will have to combat negative perceptions of government service. According to a recent poll commissioned by the Partnership for Public Service and the Council for Excellence in Government (Hart/Teeter, 2001) only one in six college graduates expressed significant interest in working for the federal government. By strong margins, respondents felt private business was better than government at offering interesting and challenging work (40 percent to 9 percent) and allowing employees to take initiative (69 percent to 3 percent).<sup>6</sup> In short, there are a variety of assumptions regarding federal employment that agencies must overcome. By showing students firsthand what government work is really like, internships could go a long way toward addressing this challenge.

Overall, the number of students hired for temporary federal positions has increased significantly over the past six years. Unfortunately this increase has not led to a comparable increase in the percentage of students who then join the federal workforce on a more permanent basis. Instead, the growth of career-oriented internships has languished over the past six years while less-structured temporary opportunities have grown. Furthermore, even as overall student employment has increased, the number of minority participants has remained relatively constant, decreasing the percentage of minorities exposed to government employment opportunities. By integrating internship programs, recruiting efforts, and diversity hiring, the agencies could obtain much-needed exposure to college graduates, while also creating a pool of diverse, tested, and easy-to-hire recruits. Only then would the government realize the full potential of internships.

## THE CASE FOR INTERNSHIPS

Whether employers are facing a flush year of large-scale recruiting or a “down” year with a minimum of new hires, surveys show that internships and co-ops provide the best return on investment for bringing new talent into an organization.<sup>7</sup> The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a nonprofit that has examined college recruiting and employment issues

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<sup>5</sup> Howard N Fullerton, Jr. and Mitra Toossi, “Labor force projections to 2010: steady growth and changing composition,” *Monthly Labor Review*, v. 124, no. 11 (November 2001), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *The Unanswered Call to Public Service: Americans' Attitudes Before and After September 11*, Hart/Teeter Research.

<sup>7</sup> “Making the Most of Recruiting Resources” (Data from *Job Outlook 2002* survey) at [naceweb.org](http://naceweb.org).

Co-ops are a form of internship in which the participant is compensated and the work is directly related to academic goals. Employment under the federal Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) will typically meet this definition.

since 1956, publishes a variety of studies on the impact and evolution of internships.<sup>8</sup> According to NACE's most recent employer survey, organizations feel internships are the most effective means of bringing in new talent.<sup>9</sup> Employers hired approximately 25 percent of full-time recruits from the ranks of their own intern programs, and more than half of these new recruits had some internship experience.<sup>10</sup> NACE also found that, on average, employers with experiential education programs offered full-time positions to 57.5 percent of their summer hires, with 62.4 percent of these recruits accepting jobs. Furthermore, intern recruits tend to stay with their employers longer than their counterparts who are hired "off the street."<sup>11</sup>

Internships are also an especially useful tool in recruiting hard-to-find professionals, such as those with technical skills. A 2001 NACE study found that co-ops and internships are the most effective methods of hiring technical talent. Federal government agencies also appreciate technology co-ops because the field is changing so quickly.<sup>12</sup>

While smart organizations are able to use internships to quickly recruit the best possible graduates, failure to do so is often the fault of employers who do not make students aware of full time positions or extend offers soon enough. When students are unsure if an internship will lead to a full-time position, they often seek out other jobs. By the time employers offer a full-time opportunity, interns have already found work elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

When compared to the private sector, which recruits interns as a pipeline for permanent talent, the government often does not allow its voice to be heard over the din of competing employers. One of the greatest barriers to government employment is that students are uninformed about federal opportunities. Hart/Teeter's study found that a lack of information is the single greatest barrier to

### The U.S. Customs Service

The Customs Service intern program, which currently has 40 students, is a one- to two-year program. Over their tenure, interns are being prepared for permanent placement as special agents and import specialists in the Offices of Investigations and Field Operations.

The interns participate in rotational assignments which include training, shadowing, mentoring, and reflecting with their peers. "The way that the program is designed, interns have a lot of flexibility," said current intern Cara Grote. "It is not just a copying and filing internship. I am definitely considering this as a career."

A graduate of the intern program, Alvin Medina's interest shifted from municipal government to federal service. "During my internship, my entire focus changed into working for the U.S. Government," Medina claimed in a recent interview. "I have my whole career ahead of me, and I am looking forward to 100 percent of it being with the government."

Of approximately 20 interns who graduated from the program last year, Customs converted eight students to full-time positions.

<sup>8</sup> "Organization History," at [naceweb.org](http://naceweb.org). NACE surveys its employer members for its studies. The statistics cited in this report come from an April 2001 survey of 561 employers who previously indicated to NACE that they offered experiential education programs and college members. The survey had a 30 percent response rate. NACE sent some employers, who indicated that they would provide more details, a second survey.

<sup>9</sup> "Making the Most," at [naceweb.org](http://naceweb.org).

<sup>10</sup> Melanie Gold, "Colleges, Employers Report on Experiential Education," at [naceweb.org](http://naceweb.org).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Experiential education programs include internship and co-op programs integrating employment experiences and academic educational goals.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Patterson, "The Employer's Guide: Successful Intern Co-op Programs," at [naceweb.org](http://naceweb.org).

<sup>13</sup> Mary Scott, "Internship Program Best Practices Revisited: Undergraduate Students Benchmark Quality and Effectiveness, Executive Summary," at [naceweb.org](http://naceweb.org).

federal recruitment. While 52 percent of non-federal workers feel they are well-informed about private sector jobs, only 29 percent feel well-informed about federal government opportunities. This awareness gap is troubling but steps are being taken to address the problem. The government, led by the efforts of the Office of Personnel Management, has already taken a variety of steps to increase public outreach. For example, OPM has joined with the Partnership for Public Service in sponsoring “A Call to Serve,” an initiative specifically aimed at informing college students about federal career opportunities.

Internships should be integrated into these efforts at expanding outreach to students. Agencies that have participated in federal experiential education programs have realized genuine benefits. The Merit Systems Protection Board has reported that internships are “a win-win arrangement for both students and agencies . . . even students who are not in the co-op program are introduced to the idea of working for the Federal Government. This makes the program a good public relations tool for establishing long-term relationships with schools.”<sup>14</sup> Other benefits noted by MSPB included the fact that permanent employees “benefit from the new perspectives that the students bring into the workplace,” and agencies are able to “stretch their recruiting dollars.”<sup>15</sup> Almost half the agencies responding to the MSPB’s questionnaire also called attention to the high quality of the permanent employees they hired through the program.

## **FEDERAL INTERNSHIPS**

Internship programs can be equally effective in the private sector and the federal government. By integrating experiential education programs with overall recruiting goals, the government could steal a very successful page from the private sector’s playbook, allowing agencies to educate a generation of students about federal opportunities while utilizing an existing pipeline for new recruits.

### *Student Education Employment Program*

The government’s current student employment programs are authorized by the Student Education Employment Program (SEEP) regulations.<sup>16</sup> Established in 1994 as part of the “Reinventing Government” initiatives, SEEP consolidated the Cooperative Education Program, the Federal Junior Fellowship Program, the Stay-in-School Program, and the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Program. SEEP has two major components: the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) and the Student Career Employment Program (SCEP).

The SCEP program is highly structured; students appointed under the authority must be doing work that is specifically related to their academic major or career goals. Entry into the program requires a written agreement between the student, school, and employing agency detailing the nature of work assignments, schedule of work and classes, evaluation procedures, and requirements for success.

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<sup>14</sup> *Entering Professional Positions in the Federal Government*, 1994, Merit Systems Protection Board, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>16</sup> Code of Federal Regulations, 5 CFR Section 213.3202.

In contrast, job duties for STEP interns do not have to relate to a students' academic curriculum and/or career goals. This provides more flexibility, though the nature of the intern's work can also be less focused.

*Non-Competitive Conversion: Simplifying the Federal Hiring Process Through Internships*

A major benefit for SCEP participants and agencies is the potentially easy conversion of interns into permanent employees. Most applicants who apply for permanent positions with the

<p><b>NASA's Internship Program</b></p> <p>The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has long been a model agency in recruiting recent graduates through student internship programs. Though it uses the SCEP authority for its program, NASA describes its internships as co-ops.</p> <p>This year NASA plans to employ 375 co-ops. The Johnson Space Center, home to NASA's famed Mission Control Center, will employ 170 of those students, in fields ranging from computer science, to engineering, to business.</p> <p>Graduates of the program speak highly of the opportunities they received while interning at NASA. "The best thing about cooping is being treated like an equal," says Wendy Stone, a student employee from Georgia Tech. We are not doing 'grunt work.' We have real responsibilities and our own projects which we receive the credit for." Others appreciate the experiential aspect of the program. Nick Skyland feels the experience provides "a unique opportunity to preview my career before graduation."</p> <p>In 2001 NASA converted 72 SCEP participants to full-time employment.</p>	<p>government go through a competitive process regulated by federal law. Though parts of the process are necessary, implementing a merit-based hiring system can often be unnecessarily complicated and time-consuming. Many federal managers even claim the hiring process is "broken."</p> <p>Non-competitive conversion allows employers to avoid this process and convert interns to term, career, or career-conditional appointments. These conversions are by no means required, and the new appointment must be used to fill an open position. Yet the conversion authority recognizes that allowing supervisors to keep skilled and committed interns makes sense.</p> <p>SCEP interns may be non-competitively converted upon graduation if they: (i) complete coursework toward a degree within 120 days; (ii) receive a recommendation from the employing agency in which their career related work was performed; (iii) meet the qualifications for the targeted position in</p>
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which they receive the appointment; (iv) are entering an occupation related to their academic training and career work; and (v) completed a minimum of 640 hours of career related work. Although the STEP program does not allow for non-competitive conversion, there is a formal method of transferring STEP interns to the SCEP program, should they meet that program's requirements.

Over the past six years the number of overall participants in these two federal student employment programs has increased dramatically, jumping from 34,086 participants in 1995 to 52,888 participants in 2001. Unfortunately, practically all of the growth has occurred in the STEP program, rather than the more career-oriented SCEP program. Therefore, in the areas of

minority recruitment and conversion to permanent employment—where student hiring can really pay off—the government has not exploited the full benefits of these programs.<sup>17</sup>

**Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) and  
Student Career Employment Program (SCEP) Participation**

**Fiscal Year 2001:**

43,465 were in the STEP program

9,423 were in the SCEP program

52,888 total student employment program participants

19,971 participants were minorities (38 percent)

**Fiscal Year 1995:**

23,144 were in the STEP program

10,942 were in the SCEP program

34,086 total student employment program participants

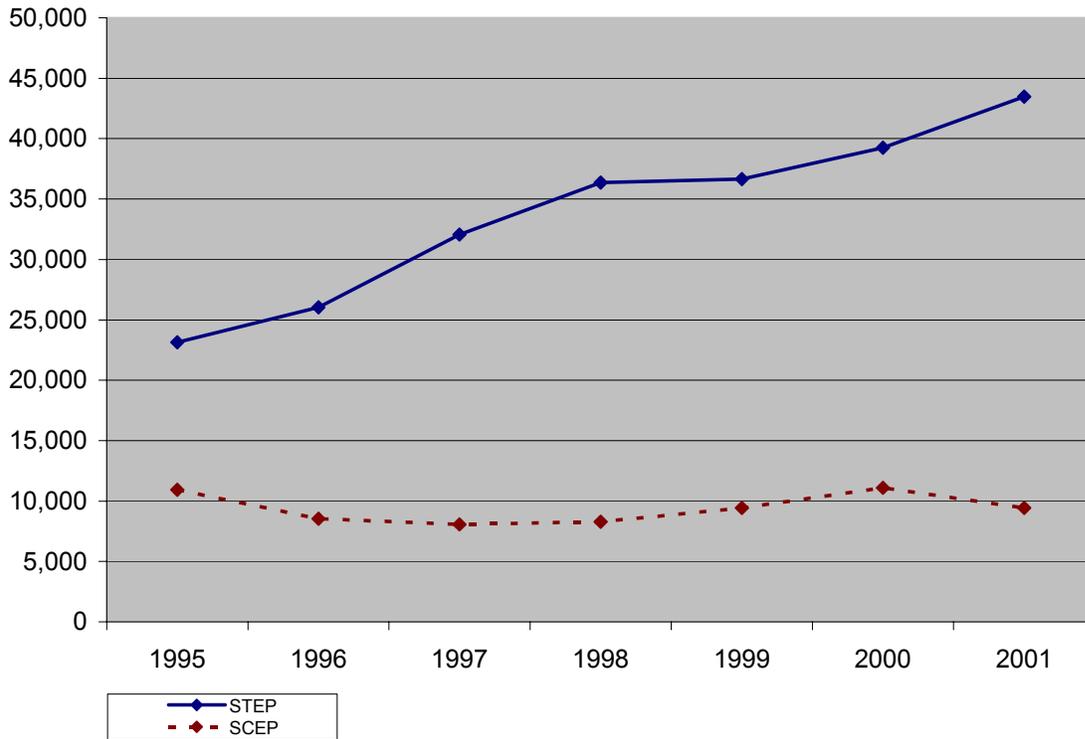
20,577 participants were minorities (60 percent)

*(U.S. Office of Personnel Management Fact Book: Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics, 1997-2001, Editions; all editions available at <http://www.opm.gov/feddata/01factbk.pdf>)*

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management Fact Book: Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics, 1997-2001, Editions; all editions available at <http://www.opm.gov/feddata/01factbk.pdf>; additional information for 1995 from the Central Personnel Data File.

**Career-Oriented Internships Decline While Overall Student Employment Increases  
(Participation in STEP and SCEP, 1995-2001)**



The data shows that over the past seven years, overall use of student employment has increased by 55 percent. However, even while agencies' use of STEP hires consistently increased, their use of SCEP—the pipeline through which the government can convert interns to permanent employment—remained relatively stable or declined. Therefore, while the number of students working for the government under these programs has increased significantly over the last several years, the percentage of these students who were ultimately converted to permanent federal employment actually declined. In FY 1995, for example, there were 34,086 participants in the STEP and SCEP programs. Yet the government only converted 1,469, or 4.3 percent, to permanent federal jobs. In FY 2001 the government hired 52,888 students under both programs and 1,614, or just over 3 percent, converted to permanent positions.<sup>18</sup> The growth of the STEP program has also eroded the impact of minority participation; the number of minorities has remained relatively constant causing the percentage of minority interns to drop from 60 percent to 38 percent. Furthermore, although agencies converted 17 percent of SCEP interns in 2001, over the previous six years the conversion rate had remained stagnant at approximately 12 percent.

Over the past five years, seven agencies utilizing the SCEP authority have consistently employed between 69 and 71 percent of all SCEP interns, despite the fact that they employ only 55 percent

<sup>18</sup> Students hired into temporary federal jobs under the STEP program can be considered federal positions through the regular competitive process. While there is no centralized tracking of the number of former STEP hires who become permanent federal employees, preliminary evidence suggests that there are very few.

of the federal workforce. The aggressiveness of these agencies demonstrated not only how other offices could use the authority—it also reveals the degree to which many are failing to do so.

### **Student Career Employment Program (SCEP) as a Pipeline**

**Fiscal Year 2001:**

9,423 interns were in the SCEP program  
1,614 (17 percent) converted

**Fiscal Year 2000:**

11,093 were in the SCEP program  
1,201 (11 percent) converted

**Fiscal Year 1995:**

10,942 were in the SCEP program  
1,469 (13 percent) converted

*(U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Central Personnel Data File)*

Despite the growth in federal student employment, therefore, the federal government has seen little increase in recruitment of students into career-oriented programs and only recently experienced a rise in the number of intern conversions. Clearly, when compared to nationwide intern hiring patterns, as the government's most targeted career intern program, SCEP has missed the mark. NACE studies show most organizations are netting 35.8 percent of their interns as permanent employees, while government hires no more than 17 percent of their interns. The use patterns across agencies also indicate that, while some offices have very active SCEP programs, other organizations could increase their career-oriented internship activities. An increase in the number of SCEP participants would go a long way in improving federal recruitment at the college level.

#### *Finding Out About Federal Internships on the Web*

The advantages of internships, both inside and outside the government, are clear. Unfortunately, the message about the availability of federal internships is not reaching its maximum potential audience. The Office of Personnel Management runs a variety of websites that showcase internships, including USAJobs, Studentjobs.gov, and Students.gov. All of these sites provide useful information about federal internships, but unfortunately there is no single government website that comprehensively lists the myriad of internship opportunities. These include regional programs, internships run by specific agencies, and opportunities targeting specific ethnic, professional or skill groups. While the Partnership for Public Service and OPM have taken initial steps to consolidate this information at calltoserve.org, certain internships are still not listed anywhere on the Internet. Furthermore, there appears to be confusion regarding the differences between SEEP, STEP, and SCEP in many web resources. Web pages often use the

terms interchangeably despite the fact that there are distinct differences. Ideally, agencies should list all internship opportunities on one government web site, while also targeting student-specific employment sites, such as MonsterTrak. In addition, agencies should take advantage of the Call to Serve network of colleges and universities to make sure that educational institutions are aware of local and national internship opportunities.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, it is important to recognize that over the past few years the federal government has created a variety of scholarship programs to recruit bright graduates. For example, the Scholarship for Service program offers educational scholarships to student in the information technology field who commit to serving in government for the same length as their scholarship. This summer 26 recipients of this award are serving in internships at federal agencies. The National Security Education Program, run by the Department of Defense, awards fellowship to undergraduate and graduate students who study overseas—particularly in countries where the language or culture is relevant to U.S. security needs. These students then commit to serve in the federal government in a national security capacity. While these programs are relatively small, they highlight the innovative ways in which government has approached the recruitment issue. This innovative thinking, however, must also be applied to internship programs in order to draw a larger and broader group into government.

#### **FELLOWSHIPS FROM OUTSIDE THE GOVERNMENT**

Some of the government's best and most dedicated interns are not employed as part of a federal program. A substantial number of interns working in federal agencies are part of the various fellowship and internship programs sponsored by non-profit organizations throughout Washington, DC. After recruiting students and graduates with particular skills or backgrounds, these organizations place students in educational internships that match their interests, help students relocate to the Washington area, and often provide students with stipends to support them during their stints in the federal government.

Among the organizations that coordinate such programs are The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Affairs and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU).

The overall mission of The Washington Center is to place students in internships “representing major professional fields in the private, public and nonprofit sector.”<sup>19</sup> The organization also specifically offers programs for students interested in working at federal agencies. Over the past five years, more than 35 percent of The Washington Center's roughly 5,000 interns served in federal agencies, the White House, and in Congress. In 2001 alone, The Washington Center placed approximately 170 interns in government agency positions, from the Internal Revenue Service to the State Department.

The Washington Center also provides free housing for students who are participating in its Diversity Leaders Internship Program. Though it chooses a select group of students for this program, the Center particularly encourages applications from those who are “interested in

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<sup>19</sup> See The Washington Center's website. Available: <<http://www.twc.edu>>.

working for government agencies.” Overall, The Washington Center has a minority participation rate of 18 percent. Furthermore, since its inception in 1975, approximately 25 percent of The Washington Center’s 28,000 graduates have pursued some form of public service, making it a clear pipeline for potential federal recruits.

Over the past ten years, HACU’s National Internship Program (HNIP) has placed 3,400 undergraduate and graduate students in federal agency internships across the country. In 2001 alone over 615 students served in 22 federal agencies. While larger agencies, like the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, made strong use of the program, interns also found positions at the Library of Congress, the Farm Credit Administration and the Central Intelligence Agency. Participants also brought diversity to the program. While the majority of participants were Hispanic, Asian Americans, African Americans, and American Indians also served in the HNIP.

Evaluations of the HACU’s National Internship Program reveal the benefits of partnering with nonprofit organizations. Before entering the program, only 56 percent of participants had ever thought of interning or working for the federal government. Yet after their experience, HNIP students were not only interested in joining the federal government—their supervisors were also highly interested in hiring them. The fact that 95 percent of supervisors felt HACU interns made valuable contributions and 93 percent claimed they would hire those interns makes the inability of government to convert these interns all the more disappointing.<sup>20</sup>

There are also smaller programs run by organizations with similar minority outreach missions. Programs similar to HNIP have been run by the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) and the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS). NAFEO places students in a wide range of federal offices, though Health and Human Services and Transportation have been particularly enthusiastic in their use of the program. Over the summer of 2001, these two agencies accepted 59 and 45 interns, respectively. Other agencies partnering with NAFEO included Defense, Labor, Interior, Veterans Affairs, NASA, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Energy. In total, 158 students took part in the program over the summer of 2001.

The APAICS internship program has been in existence for six years, during which the organization has placed approximately 20 students in federal agency internships. Although this is a relatively small number of interns, the program is trying to focus more on government and less on nonprofits in the coming years.

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<sup>20</sup> *HACU National Internship Program Supervisor Program Evaluations, Summer 2001-Overall Summary and HACU National Internship Program Intern Program Evaluation.*

**Statistics from the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities' (HACU)  
Summer 2001 National Internship Program**

*Supervisors*

- 95 percent of supervisors said interns made valuable contributions to the agency's work
- 93 percent said they would hire their intern
- 66 percent offered the intern to return to work in the future - but only 4 percent as a permanent federal employee

*Interns*

- 73 percent strongly agreed with the statement "I am interested in pursuing a career in the federal government"
- 82 percent said their internship helped them reach their conclusions about careers in federal service
- Only 56 percent had ever thought of interning/working with the federal government before this experience

*HACU National Internship Program Supervisor Program Evaluations, Summer 2001-Overall Summary and HACU National Internship Program Intern Program Evaluation*

There are a vast number of intelligent and dedicated interns working within the federal government through nonprofit organizations. Further evidence shows that many of these students are top candidates for entry-level federal positions. Unfortunately, unlike SCEP participants, these interns are not eligible for non-competitive conversion. In other words, no matter how good these interns are, agencies cannot make them an offer. At the conclusion of their internships, these candidates must compete in the lengthy and confusing process of applying for a federal job in order to re-enter the federal government. Given the well-publicized difficulties with the federal hiring process—as well as NACE's findings regarding employers who delay in offering interns full-time positions—one can safely presume that the government is losing a fair share of these important candidates.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal intern programs offer students an excellent education in the challenges and rewards of public service. Students who serve under SCEP, STEP, or programs arranged by non-profit organizations receive more than income; they gain valuable experience and exposure to the federal work environment. Studies on the value of internships, however, show that these programs can also provide an excellent pipeline for recruiting. With the government facing a variety of workforce challenges, it should maximize the value of internships for both the educational needs of students and the talent needs of the federal government.

To help the federal government make better use of the pool of highly qualified and motivated individuals among the tens of thousands of students hired each year into temporary federal jobs or internships, the Partnership for Public Service provides the following recommendations:

**1. Federal agencies should specifically include student employment programs in their strategic workforce planning efforts as a talent pool for future permanent hires and should allocate resources accordingly.** In some cases, that will require a shift in emphasis from simply providing jobs to providing a meaningful and challenging work experience for the students that will allow both the agency and the student to determine whether there is a good match. It will take a little extra time and resources for some agencies to do this right, but the return on investment will be well worth it.

**2. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management should modify the current regulations governing Student Educational Employment Programs to assist agencies in making better use of this talent pool.** Specifically, OPM should:

- Revise the current guidance in the Code of Federal Regulation (5 CFR, Section 213.3202) for noncompetitive conversion to the career appointments to allow federal agencies greater flexibility in hiring high potential students who have provided sufficient demonstration of their job-related qualifications and competencies. Those regulations currently allow for conversions from appointments made under the SCEP program and only within the context of a formally structured program that requires, among other conditions, completion of at least 640 hours of career-related work. OPM should consider allowing agencies, with appropriate oversight by OPM, greater flexibility in setting the criteria that must be met for an offer of non-competitive conversion to permanent employment.
- Allow the same considerations shown to students employed via STEP and SCEP appointments to be applied to comparably situated students working in federal agencies but working under agreements with non-profit organizations such as HACU and The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars.

**3. Federal agencies, OPM, and other organizations providing student employment opportunities in the federal government need to cooperate in improving the visibility and availability of information regarding student employment and internship opportunities in the federal government.** There is not yet a single government web site that provides clear and

complete information on federal internship opportunities. While there are websites that attempt to do this, none of them have yet proven to be truly comprehensive. The information available should include opportunities in regional offices and internships run by specific agencies or targeting specific ethnic or professional groups. Collecting this information and offering it to potential interns in a single place would help ensure that students find the right fit and don't turn elsewhere to meet their experiential education needs. While agencies may be trying to meet specific needs through their intern programs, it is imperative that their opportunities reach the greatest possible audience and build relationships with institutions of higher education through networks such as "A Call to Serve," and job boards that students use to find out about internship opportunities.

**4. OPM, in partnership with federal agencies and other organizations, should gather and disseminate "best practices" for recruiting and using interns and other temporary student employees.** While the government may wish to consider best practices from the private sector, it should also learn from the successes of the various federal departments and agencies. Government organizations such as Customs and NASA might be excellent resources for setting up workshops on intern recruiting and efficient internship management. Some successful government intern programs, such as NASA's, are not only models within government; they are also cited across industries nationwide (see *The Elements of Effective Experiential Education Programs* by Melanie Gold at [www.naceweb.org](http://www.naceweb.org))

**5. . The Administration should seek broad support and collaboration from all stakeholders in developing options for improving the strategic use of student employment and intern programs.** This should involve active solicitation of specific ideas and suggestions from relevant organizations, including federal agencies, nonprofits that sponsor federal internships, college presidents, students, and others with an interest in expanding employment opportunities for high-potential students in the federal government. An open forum might be sponsored that would allow interested stakeholders to develop new ideas for improving outreach to students through internship programs; consider the desirability of unifying or reforming existing internship programs; and offering ideas for techniques that could improve conversion rates of successful interns into permanent federal employees.