



# *Great* **EXPECTATIONS**

*What Students Want in an Employer and How Federal Agencies Can Deliver It*

JANUARY 2009



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

**UNIVERSUM**

Building Brands to Capture Talent

### **About the Partnership for Public Service**

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan nonprofit that works to revitalize our federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership:

- Raises awareness and helps improve public attitudes about government service.
- Promotes government service through outreach to college campuses and job seekers.
- Provides hands-on assistance to federal agencies to improve their operations.
- Advocates for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service.
- Generates thought-provoking resources and strategies for workforce challenges facing our federal government.

Visit the Partnership at [ourpublicservice.org](http://ourpublicservice.org).

### **About Universum**

Universum is The Global Employer Branding Leader. As thought leaders, Universum drives the industry forward having focused exclusively on Employer Branding (EB) for 20 years. As a trusted partner to over 1,200 clients worldwide including many Fortune 100 companies, Universum helps employers understand, attract and retain current and future ideal employees utilizing the company's experience, knowledge and services within research, strategic consulting and media solutions. Universum's annual IDEAL™ Employer research studies are conducted in 31 countries with over 280,000 respondents, resulting in an unrivalled knowledge base. In addition to targeted and integrated research, Universum offers a full-solution media portfolio consisting of 160 career publications in 10 countries, 10 career sites, advertisements, top company videos, and 400 events with 3,000 participants in 14 countries. This guides highly educated talent in their search to identify their IDEAL™ Employers. In the United States, Universum operates under the name Universum USA.

In the aftermath of his historic election, President-elect Barack Obama's change.gov Web site was flooded with resumes at a rate of 100,000 job applications a week. Clearly, these numbers say a lot about Obama and his ability to energize the public, particularly young people. But it is also worth exploring what this apparent flood of interest might imply about job seekers' opinions about government service in general.

Changes in the economy may be driving shifts in public perceptions about what constitutes an ideal workplace, potentially creating new opportunities for some employers to bring in top talent, including the nation's largest employer: our federal government. The Partnership for Public Service and Universum USA teamed up to examine the results of Universum USA's 2008 survey of undergraduates—The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008—to identify the qualities young people seek in an employer. Together, we took a look at how well those match up with what government has to offer, using undergraduates' views about some specific agencies to get a better sense of what federal jobs are most appealing and why.

This report details the key findings of this research, and there are a number of signs to suggest government's appeal extends beyond the new president. More importantly, the report offers operational advice to federal recruiters about how they can use this information to do a better job of attracting and retaining top talent.

It's been nearly 50 years since President John F. Kennedy called this nation to service and changed the face of our federal government. The excitement created by Obama's election is reminiscent of that era. At the same time, we face a deeply battered economy, prompting many college graduates to now consider government service as an option.

The confluence of these events provides the new president with an opportunity to lead a transformation in government—to tap into an expanded and high-skilled young talent pool, which is ready to fill critical jobs and make a difference. We hope this report will serve as a useful tool to help seize that opportunity.



Max Stier  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year's college seniors will enter one of the most hostile job markets in generations. Employers are increasingly downsizing rather than expanding. With tight credit markets, fewer entrepreneurs are starting new businesses. Wages are stagnant, and spikes in health care costs are making it tougher for employers to offer this benefit.

Amid all the bad news, at least one employer will be hiring in the coming year, and it also happens to be America's largest—the U.S. government. Our federal government will need to hire tens of thousands of people in the next year to fill mission-critical positions. With roughly a third of its workforce expected to leave in the next five years, government's demand for skilled workers will continue in the foreseeable future.

Are these federal jobs a good match for today's young job seekers? A survey of almost 32,000<sup>1</sup> American undergraduates by Universum USA suggests the answer is, "Yes."

TABLE 1  
HOW FEDERAL AGENCIES FARE AMONG  
UNIVERSUM USA'S TOP FIFTEEN IDEAL EMPLOYERS

Overall Ranking	Employer
1	Google
2	Walt Disney
3	Apple Computer
4	Ernst & Young
5	Department of State
6	Goldman Sachs
7	Deloitte
8	Peace Corps
9	National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)
10	PricewaterhouseCoopers
11	Teach for America
12	Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
13	Microsoft
14	Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
15	JPMorgan

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition

<sup>1</sup> 43,313 undergraduates participated in Universum USA's 2008 survey. Of these, 31,876 self-classified their "nationality" as "American" as opposed to Canadian or Chinese, etc. The survey question asked about nationality rather than citizenship. Because U.S. citizenship is a requirement for the vast majority of federal jobs, the data reported hereafter (unless otherwise stated) is from the sample classifying themselves as Americans.

For the past 20 years, Universum USA has conducted an annual survey—the Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey—that asks college students what they are looking for in employers. Working with the Partnership for Public Service, the research firm studied its 2008 survey results to examine, for the first time, perspectives for and about federal employers.

The key findings of this survey:

- **"Government/Public Service" is the most popular industry choice out of 46 options.** Seventeen percent of American undergrads select the government/public service industry as one in which they would "ideally want to work when choosing [their] first employment after graduation." The next most popular industries are health care (13 percent), education (12 percent), and marketing/advertising (11 percent).
  - **Five of the top 15 "ideal" employers—from a list of 260—are federal agencies!** Jobs with the Department of State, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Peace Corps, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are all highly coveted.
  - **Government offers the main qualities undergraduates seek.** A healthy work/life balance is undergraduates' number one career goal, with 66 percent of students citing this as a priority. Serving the greater good and job stability are the second most desirable traits.
- While the top-line findings are encouraging for federal recruiters, the survey also revealed some challenges.
- **Students care a lot about the reputation of their employer.** Despite positive views about selected agencies and a focus on working in support of a cause—which many associate positively with government service—many young people fear "bureaucracy" and "red tape" if they work for government. This adversely impacts every agency's ability to recruit.
  - **Interest in government service is lower among groups government needs most.** Students with technical/scientific majors are less interested in government/public service.

- **Salary expectations are high.** Respondents expect to earn an annual salary of more than \$49,000 in their first job after graduation. In contrast, entry-level federal government starting salaries for students with undergraduate degrees typically range from about \$30,000 to \$38,000, adjusted by locality.

To help federal agencies put this information to use, this report contains operational advice for agency leaders to help them establish or sharpen their images and target their recruiting activities to maximize their effectiveness. Building on their agency's mission, agency leaders must understand the preferences and interests of the new generation of students they seek to hire, and brand their agencies distinctly so that those students understand what they do and what they offer. Government agencies must adjust their strategic and tactical recruiting plans to meet these preferences and needs. Agencies also must meet students online, on campus, including at career fairs, and provide them the information and the meaningful human contact they seek when they go to each of these different sources.

While the economic downturn creates more favorable conditions for agencies to bring in top workers, government will need to be smart to take advantage of this opportunity. Our federal government needs the very best talent our country has to offer, and those individuals will have choices even in a down market. Understanding the data in this report and utilizing its recommendations will enhance government's ability to bring in a greater share of the best talent, regardless of economic conditions.

## WHAT STUDENTS WANT IN AN EMPLOYER

Students are interested in working in government—it's their industry of first choice for their first job after graduation! Seventeen percent of American students consider government/public service an “ideal industry,” followed by health care (13 percent), education (12 percent) and marketing/advertising (11 percent). This proportion has remained relatively constant over the past several years.

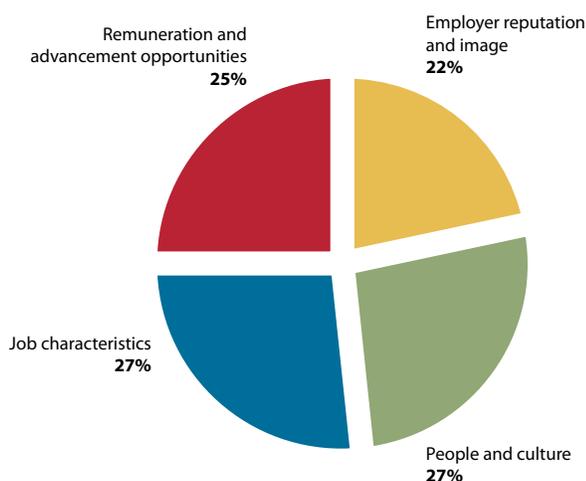
Digging deeper, what exactly do students look for in their employers?

The Universum USA undergraduate survey<sup>2</sup> classifies attributes of employers under four “driver” categories:

1. Employer reputation and image;
2. People and culture;
3. Job characteristics; and
4. Remuneration and advancement opportunities.

Understanding how students value each of these four areas and the details that comprise each is vital to developing a comprehensive, strategic approach to recruiting. Interestingly, none of the four categories is much more important than the others: American students weigh the relative importance of each fairly equally.

FIGURE 1  
RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF FOUR DRIVERS



The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition

<sup>2</sup> The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008 – American Undergraduate Edition: 13th Annual Edition

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**Employer reputation and image:** Undergrads place great store in high ethical standards and good reputation as employer attributes, and in working for a cause

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Students care a lot about the reputation and values of employers for whom they will consider working. Survey results show that good reputation and high ethical standards are the “image” attributes selected by the largest percentage of students, 60 percent and 54 percent, respectively. A distant third—innovative products and services—was selected by 27 percent of American students. On a related note, which we will explore later, students (particularly those interested in government/public service) place considerable importance on working for a cause when describing their career goals (table 2). This links nicely to the mission-driven nature of federal agencies.

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**People and culture:** Work/life balance is essential

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Studies of today's youth consistently show that work/life balance is a priority, and Universum's survey results echo those findings. Four characteristics top the list of attributes in the “people and culture” category. Sixty one percent want a good work/life balance, 53 percent want a job that offers a friendly work environment, 47 percent say they favor a creative and dynamic work environment, and 45 percent choose having leaders who will support their development. The top-ranking work/life balance characteristic, in particular, offers many federal employers an opportunity to be especially competitive with the private sector because many agencies offer considerable flexibility in working hours and tele-working opportunities, as well as day care centers and even access to fitness facilities for employees.

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**Job characteristics:** Employment security and opportunities for continued development are priority attributes

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In this category, no single attribute stands out as the one “must-have,” but many are valued. This tells us that students expect and demand a lot. Secure employment (42 percent), professional training and development (38 percent), flexible working conditions (37 percent) and challenging work (36 percent) are highly desirable to students. With its emphasis on training and personal

TABLE 2  
 CAREER GOALS OF AMERICAN STUDENTS INTERESTED IN  
 SELECTED INDUSTRIES FOR EMPLOYMENT AFTER GRADUATION

Career Goals	All American Students	Students Interested in Government/Public service	Students Interested in Nonprofit/Not-for-Profit Industry
To be a leader or manager of people	32%	26%	19%
To be a technical or functional expert	15%	12%	5%
To be autonomous or independent	14%	13%	13%
To be competitively or intellectually challenged	40%	40%	39%
To be dedicated to a cause or to feel that I am serving a greater good	46%	63%	80%
To be entrepreneurial or creative/innovative	24%	15%	20%
To be secure or stable in my job	46%	44%	32%
To have an international career	17%	25%	28%
To have work/life balance	66%	60%	63%

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition, American Students

development and with more employment security than many other industries, government employment can be extremely competitive in these areas. In addition, more than 50,000 federal civilian jobs are located overseas, providing opportunities for many students who are interested in international travel. Add in the possibility of student loan repayment and other available incentive programs, and federal employment can offer a compelling package.

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**Remuneration and advancement opportunities:** Students' initial salary expectations are high

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Pay is definitely important to students, with competitive base salary as the most important attribute (38 percent), tied with good prospects for high future earnings. While students express concern about low federal pay, they also understand their long-term earning potential. They select future earnings, competitive benefits and leadership opportunities nearly as often as base salary. The government's strength in these areas can counterbalance the lower salary offerings if properly presented.

That's a snapshot of what "all students" are looking for in a job. The obvious next question is "what's unique about the students who express interest in government?"

“Great job locations with great job security and benefits.”

2008 survey respondent

“The positive is that it is extremely interesting work. The negative is that it doesn't pay nearly enough.”

2008 survey respondent

## WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT STUDENTS INTERESTED IN GOVERNMENT?

Notably, 63 percent of the students considering government/public service are considerably more likely to “be dedicated to a cause” or to feel they are serving the greater good as an important career goal compared to 46 percent of the overall student population. The group more likely to be dedicated to a cause is students interested in the non-profit industry (80 percent dedicated to a cause). It is not surprising that the nonprofit industry is a leading competitor for government agencies in attracting students of the Millennial generation and it is important for agencies to understand this and not to think that their only competition for the best and the brightest is the private sector.

A second area where students interested in government/public service are somewhat unique is in regard to their salary expectations. We have already noted that this is an area of concern for students when considering government: all respondents taken together report that they expect to earn an annual salary of \$49,108 in their first job after graduation. The federal government General Schedule's salaries for entry-level (Grades 5 or 7) positions have a starting range of \$30,134 (GS-5) to \$38,162 (GS-7), adjusted for cost of living in individual localities. While students—and government recruiters—may find this gap discouraging, students interested in government list their expected base salary as \$45,119, lower than the expectations for “all students.” These students also seem to recognize that there are important off-setting characteristics of federal jobs such as quick advancement in the early years of employment, generous benefits, the possibility of student loan repayment and emphasis on developmental opportunities. By focusing on these other interests, agencies may be able to overcome the salary gap.

Beyond these two important differences, agency employers will find that students interested in government are strikingly similar to their peers. Figures 2-5 on the following pages list the dimensions in each of the four categories for both all American students and the subset of students interested in government/public service. All care about employer image, with those interested in government/public service making this a slightly higher priority than all students. Likewise, more in this group find corporate social responsibility an important attribute. Students interested in government/public service are also somewhat more attracted to interaction with international clients and colleagues. But when it comes to secure employment, professional training and development, flexible working conditions and challenging work, the

interests of the general student population very closely parallels those interested in government/public service.

Aside from the exception of starting salary, the government shares a more level playing field with its hiring competitors than one might think. In other words, the data suggest that federal agencies should be able to compete with the private and nonprofit sectors for the same supply of talent. How effective are they? As the next section demonstrates, some agencies are having success. But for that to happen, as we describe later, a number of issues need to be addressed. Agencies have to focus on making clear what they do, who they are and what they offer to the talented students they want to attract.

“[FBI] forensic accounting seems very interesting and fun, but working for the government is never highly recommended.”

2008 survey respondent

“I think [the Peace Corps] is a wonderful organization; however, I am attending college entirely on student loans that I will have to begin paying off after I graduate, so I don't think it fits into my life at this time because I will have to search for a high paying job.”

2008 survey respondent

FIGURE 2

EMPLOYER REPUTATION AND IMAGE AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS

INTERESTED IN GOVERNMENT/PUBLIC SERVICE ■ COMPARED TO ALL AMERICAN STUDENTS ■

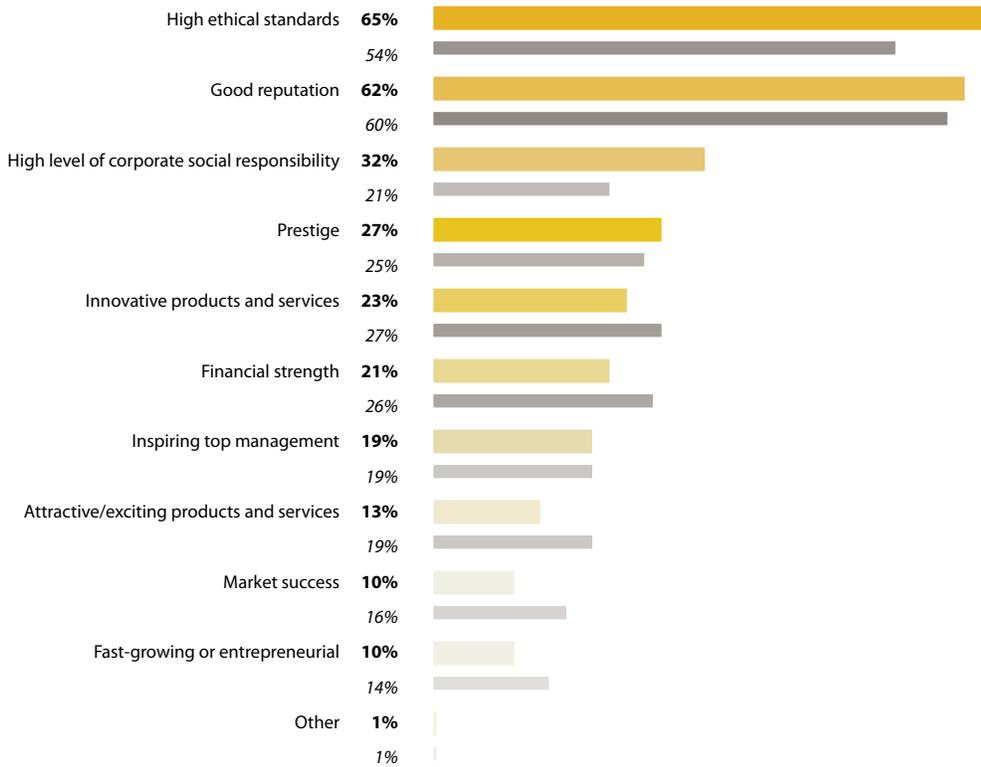


FIGURE 3

JOB CHARACTERISTICS AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS

INTERESTED IN GOVERNMENT/PUBLIC SERVICE ■ COMPARED TO ALL AMERICAN STUDENTS ■

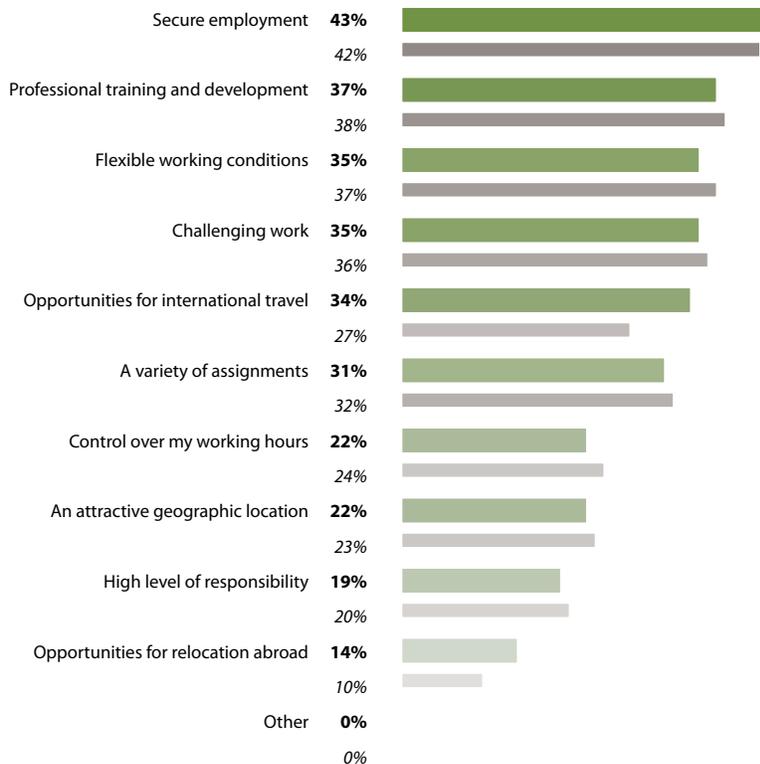


FIGURE 4

PEOPLE AND CULTURE AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS

INTERESTED IN GOVERNMENT/PUBLIC SERVICE ■ COMPARED TO ALL AMERICAN STUDENTS ■

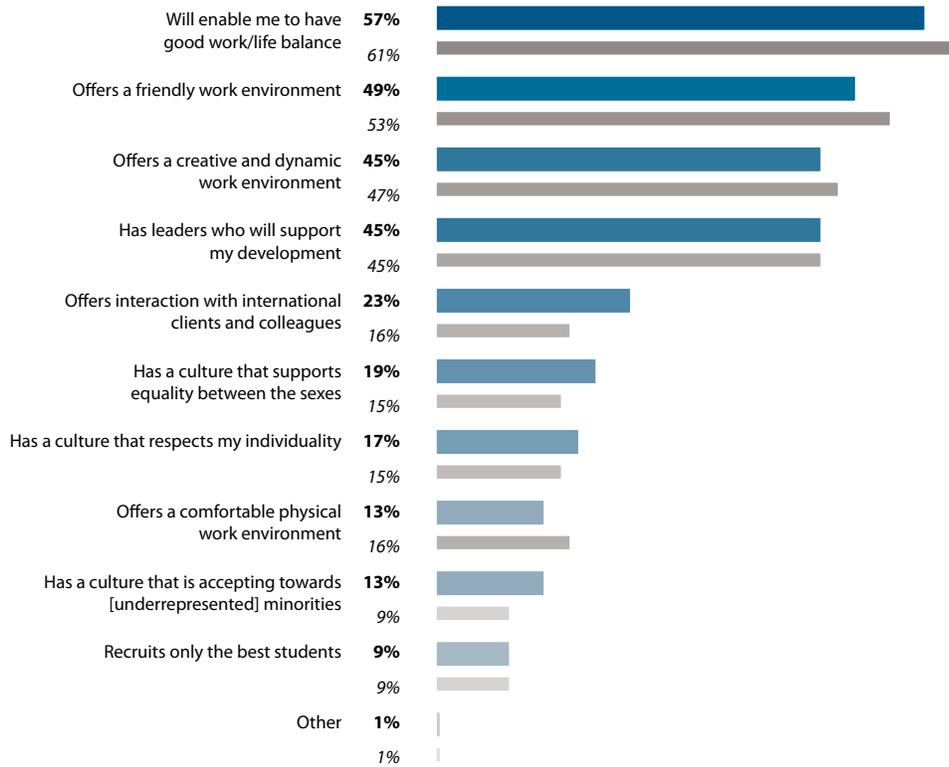
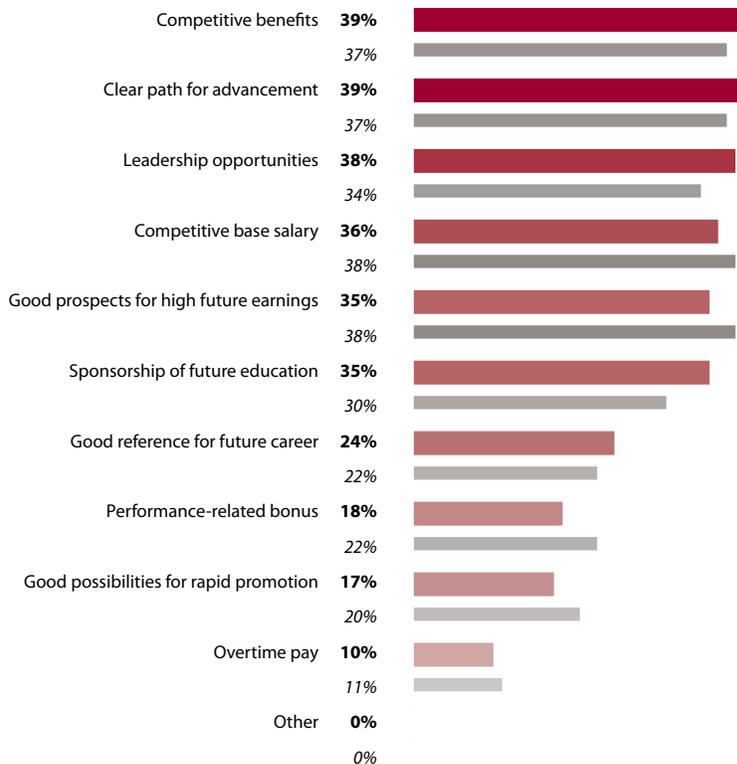


FIGURE 5

REMUNERATION AND ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS

INTERESTED IN GOVERNMENT/PUBLIC SERVICE ■ COMPARED TO ALL AMERICAN STUDENTS ■



## HOW AGENCIES MEASURE UP TO EXPECTATIONS

### SOME NOTABLE FEDERAL AGENCIES RANK HIGH AS “IDEAL EMPLOYERS”

The Universum USA survey asks undergrads to identify those employers they consider “ideal”—defined as “employers for which you would most like to work.” Although 17 percent of all undergrads respond that the government/public service industry is one industry where they would “ideally want to work” after graduation, an even larger number—more than 25 percent of all respondents—consider at least one of the twelve federal agencies included in the survey to be potentially an “ideal” employer.<sup>3</sup>

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**Each agency has a unique image and a unique opportunity to emphasize its “assets”**

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As with any employer, a federal agency may be a good fit with certain student priorities but not with others. The Peace Corps, for example, is near the top in “high ethical standards,” but ranks very low on competitive base salary and work/life balance. Analysis of federal agencies’ attributes and characteristics through the eyes of students shows that with clear branding, an agency’s unique characteristics can make it very attractive. The “brand” of course needs to be backed up by good management, a good work/life culture and challenging work. The point is that an organization’s brand is not just its logo and Web site; it includes how it really operates and its reputation in its industry and among its employees. In a way, an organization “earns” its brand, or at least the way that brand is perceived by students and others.

“I believe that the Peace Corps is a fantastic organization that not only furthers the world, but also the people who serve in the program.” *2008 survey respondent*

<sup>3</sup> Because most federal jobs require U.S. citizenship, we looked at the ideal selections for students who self-classified as “American.” When “non-American” students are excluded from Universum’s overall ideal rankings, the rankings of the federal agencies in the ideal employer list change a little. The top agencies were ranked by “American” students as follows: State ranks 4 rather than 5, the Peace Corps ranks 5 rather than 8, NASA ranks 7 rather than 9, CIA ranks 8 rather than 12, and the FBI ranks 10 rather than 14.

In the survey, students were able to associate positive attributes and one main weakness with each employer they marked as ideal. While these data are not a reliable indicator of how undergraduates at-large perceive federal agencies as a whole or working for the federal government, the numbers can shed some light on what qualities add to—or detract from—the appeal of an agency.

For the federal agencies in the Universum survey, challenging work (more than 77 percent for all agencies), high level of responsibility (exceeds 70 percent for all agencies) and good reference for future career (more than 74 percent for all but one agency) are the positives for employment with the federal government. Students are clearly willing to think beyond base salary to individual job characteristics when weighing the advantages of a position with the dozen federal agencies in the survey.

Examples of unique strengths offered by selected agencies, as perceived by students, are:

- For certain agencies such as the CIA (87 percent), FBI (83 percent), NASA (84 percent), State (73 percent) or the National Security Agency (NSA) (81 percent), the “prestige” of working with a particular well-known agency overrides concerns about attributes otherwise deemed most important. For example, neither the CIA (45 percent) nor NSA (51 percent) rank high in the “high ethical standards” attribute but their prestige trumps this concern.
- Although students typically value secure employment and professional training in jobs, NASA, NSA and the Peace Corps are among the highly ranked federal agencies that are seen as especially strong in offering “challenging work” (88 percent, 87 percent and 87 percent, respectively) despite being lower on secure employment.
- Whereas work/life balance and friendly work environment typically are ranked as very important by students, the Peace Corps ranks very high (82 percent) on the attribute of “has a culture that is accepting towards (underrepresented) minorities,” and the Air Force ranks high (75 percent) on offering interaction with international clients. NASA and the CIA rank very high (85 percent and 87 percent, respectively) on recruiting only the best students. But these agencies are not ranked high on work/life balance.

- The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) (74 percent); the Federal Reserve Bank (75 percent); U.S. Army’s Research, Development, and Engineering Command (RDECOM) (83 percent); and State (79 percent) are seen as offering a “good reference for a future career.”

In the survey, students are also provided the opportunity to identify one major “weakness” of their ideal employers. In most cases for these federal agencies, the top weaknesses are “not fast growing or entrepreneurial” (two exceptions are the CIA and the IRS), and “perceived lack of control over working hours” (which applies to many

“The [CIA’s] prestige is obvious; the life outside of work probably does not exist so that is negative.” 2008 survey respondent

of the dozen agencies in the survey). Further, although work/life balance is a strong point for government as a whole, for these specific highly ranked agencies, “lack of work/life balance” is the greatest weakness. Thus, if an agency knows the areas potential candidates think are weaknesses, they can address these “preference gaps” head on. For example, few students would expect that working for the Peace Corps or the FBI will allow them complete control of their working hours. Agencies can identify countervailing benefits or advantages—such as quick growth in responsibility or considerable opportunities for training and development—that may outweigh the perceived weaknesses.

Likewise, the on-going concern of students about low starting salary for federal employment needs to be met head on. In some instances, agencies can overcome this

weakness by stressing other attributes that make their jobs highly desirable, such as possibilities for rapid promotion and opportunities for good references. But given how often this issue comes up for students considering government, savvy agencies will aggressively address this concern by understanding what drives student interest in them and emphasizing those dimensions in recruiting materials and presentations.

“The [Federal Reserve Bank] would be a great opportunity to get fantastic experience and have a great reference for the future.” 2008 survey respondent

**Best Places to Work rankings from employees track with student perceptions of agencies**

*The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*<sup>4</sup> is a biennial rating of employee satisfaction and engagement in the federal government published by the Partnership. Six of the twelve agencies included in the Universum USA survey appear in the 2007 rankings (table 3).

This comparison suggests that agencies with high satisfaction and engagement scores are also seen as desirable by young talent. If agencies make themselves “best places” for current employees, they can use this excellence—and the testimonials of their current or former employees—to attract new ones.

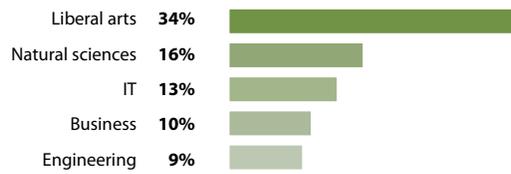
<sup>4</sup> *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government: 2007 Rankings*, Partnership for Public Service, May 2007. This report is based upon data collected biannually in the Federal Human Capital Survey, administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

TABLE 3  
BEST PLACES TO WORK RANKINGS OF AGENCIES APPEARING IN THE UNIVERSUM USA SURVEY

Agency	Best Places to Work 2007 Ranking	American Undergrads 2008 Ranking	ALL Undergrad Respondents 2008 Ranking
<i>Large Agencies (30)</i>			
U.S. Department of State	6	4	5
NASA	4	7	9
U.S. Air Force	11	47	56
<i>Agency Subcomponents (222)</i>			
Federal Bureau of Investigation	25	10	14
Internal Revenue Service	111	66	66
U.S. Customs and Border Protection	195	116	120

FIGURE 6

GOVERNMENT/PUBLIC SERVICE AS AN IDEAL INDUSTRY BY MAJOR AREA OF STUDY



The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition, American Students

**SOME ISSUES CONFRONTING FEDERAL EMPLOYERS**

While many students are interested in government/public service, federal agencies are particularly intent on filling jobs they designate as “mission critical.”<sup>5</sup> Many of these positions are technical or scientific. Agencies are also committed to building workforces that represent the nation’s population. Further, within the constraints of federal budgets and operating cycles, agencies are not always capitalizing on opportunities to use their “name recognition” and are not taking advantage of their internship programs to convert successful interns to permanent positions.

**The mission critical skills gap**

The student survey illustrates a fact well known to government agencies: students with technical and scientific skills are less interested in government and public service jobs than liberal arts majors—by a 2 to 1 margin. Given

the demand in federal agencies for employees with technical skills, including engineers and information technology professionals<sup>6</sup>, recruiters must work to generate broader interest in government/public service among students who have these backgrounds.

Agencies must better market themselves to students with critical skills. But some evidence suggests this mountain might not be so hard to climb. A surprisingly large percentage of students in these mission-critical fields consider one or more of the dozen federal agencies in the survey to be an ideal employer (business 20 percent, natural sciences 32 percent, IT 34 percent, engineering 37 percent, liberal arts 43 percent). The implication is that if the agency is doing important and meaningful work, is a good place to work, and is well-branded, then students—even in technical and scientific majors—are interested in employment at that agency. In fact, these students rank some agencies quite high. NASA, for instance, ranked first among engineers and second among those majoring in the natural sciences.

These results suggest that federal agencies can succeed by making students aware of the interesting and impor-

5 OPM identifies the federal government’s hiring needs based on data provided by agencies. Among these are “mission critical” jobs and occupation vacancies, totaling about 193,000 from fiscal years 2007-09. The top mission critical occupations are security, protection, compliance and enforcement; medical and public health; accounting, budget and business (including IT); engineering and sciences; program management /analysis and administration.

6 *Where the Jobs Are: Mission Critical Occupations for America*, Partnership for Public Service, 2007

TABLE 4  
AGENCY RANKINGS BY MAJOR FIELD OF STUDY

Overall Rank	Agency	Business/Communications	Engineering	Natural Sciences	IT	Liberal Arts
5	U.S. Department of State	18	36	11	20	1
8	Peace Corps	39	30	4	42	5
9	NASA	59	1	2	5	12
12	Central Intelligence Agency	23	14	17	14	6
14	Federal Bureau of Investigation	20	42	18	24	7
30	National Security Agency	85	34	25	13	9
49	Federal Reserve Bank	26	175	113	66	49
50	Department of Defense – Missiles and Weapons Division	105	15	43	32	30
56	U.S. Air Force	95	31	27	36	36
66	Internal Revenue Service	36	201	115	64	74

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition

tant opportunities in engineering, business, information technology and the natural sciences that exist across government.

As government recruiters reach out to students from different fields of study, they should keep in mind the differences among students in different major areas of study. For example, while good reputation is the most frequently selected for all fields of study, innovative products and services are far more important to IT (48 percent) and engineering students (52 percent) than to business majors (19 percent). As another example, a high level of corporate social responsibility is much more important to liberal arts majors (25 percent) than to IT majors (15 percent).

Differences also exist in pay-related areas, as previously noted. For instance, IT students and engineers place greater importance on competitive base salary (48 percent and 43 percent, respectively) than the other groups (liberal arts majors, 34 percent).

“[At DOD] I would be working with new and exciting technology.”

2008 survey respondent

“[NASA] does a good job of offering minority students job internships.”

2008 survey respondent

“NASA is a prestigious institution but they only research physical sciences and I am more interested in biology and healthcare.”

2008 survey respondent

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## Recruiting a diverse workforce

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In addition to filling mission critical positions, federal agencies strive to build workforces that are representative of the nation’s population. To accomplish this, agencies must make themselves attractive to all demographic groups. Fortunately, what students seek in an employer remains remarkably consistent across ethnic backgrounds: good jobs are good jobs, and good recruiting is good recruiting. But competition for talented minorities—especially in technical and scientific fields—is even more intense.

To determine what variations exist in student preferences, we look at the six ethnic groups of American student respondents that Unversum USA identified in its survey: American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian-Indian, Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian-American-Pacific Islander and White/Caucasian. We find some differences, but none are strong. “Financial strength” is somewhat more important for African-American students while “inspiring top management” is more important for Asian-Indian students. We find that Caucasians interested in government/public service value challenging work more than other ethnic groups. Asian-Indian students are the one group that does not value secure employment first, instead valuing professional training and development first and secure employment fifth.

However, all respondents value highly a creative and dynamic work environment, good work/life balance, a friendly work environment and support for their development. As for remuneration and advancement opportunities, the most highly valued attributes across all demographic groups are competitive benefits, leadership opportunities, good prospects for high future earnings and a clear path for advancement.

Employers who are successful at attracting minority students do so by paying attention to the subtle preferences of the group(s) in which they are most interested and focusing their recruiting strategies. Thus, while the basics of good recruiting are relatively consistent for all students, savvy employers use information about student preferences to craft strategies that can yield targeted recruiting success.

TABLE 5

## "LOST" AMERICAN STUDENTS FOR EACH FEDERAL AGENCY IN THE 2008 UNIVERSUM USA SURVEY

2008 ranking for American undergrads	Agency	Number of students who selected the agency as "ideal"	Number of students who would "consider" the agency	Percentage of "lost" students
4	U.S. Department of State	2,760	6,329	56%
5	Peace Corps	2,433	5,373	55%
7	NASA	2,267	6,160	63%
8	Central Intelligence Agency	2,256	5,672	60%
10	Federal Bureau of Investigation	2,039	5,235	61%
27	National Security Agency	1,095	3,433	68%
40	Department of Defense – Missiles and Weapons Division	762	2,737	72%
47	U.S. Air Force	634	2,619	76%
51	Federal Reserve Bank	614	3,041	80%
66	Internal Revenue Service	495	2,023	76%
116	U.S. Customs and Border Protection	228	1,250	82%
129	U.S. Army RDECOM	184	1,182	84%

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition, American Students

### Lost students; lost opportunities

The Universum USA survey asks students to identify companies and agencies they would consider working for, and then separately asks them to identify five of these for which they ideally "would most like to work." The difference between the students who would simply consider an agency as an employer and those who would consider it "ideal" is called "lost students." These lost students represent opportunities for hiring that the employer may have missed.

Students may consider an employer because they know the name or are familiar with the image, but not pick it as "ideal" because they may not be clear about what an agency actually represents, does or offers. The image of an employer may be complicated by external and internal factors. Research shows that "the more students know, the more they like" federal agencies as potential employers.<sup>7</sup>

That is why astute employers work with universities, student groups, faculty members and the data at hand to decrease the "lost" percentage and capitalize upon the name recognition and branding they already have in order to increase the number of ideal selections. Table 5 shows the percentage of "lost" students for each of the twelve federal agencies in the 2008 survey. Not surprisingly, lower-ranked agencies generally have higher percentages of lost candidates.

<sup>7</sup> *Making the Difference: A Blueprint for Matching University Students with Federal Opportunities*, Partnership for Public Service, October 2007

"Not sure what RDECOM stands for, but in general, I believe the U.S. Army to be a great employer with excellent advancement opportunities and [a] decent reputation in the job market."

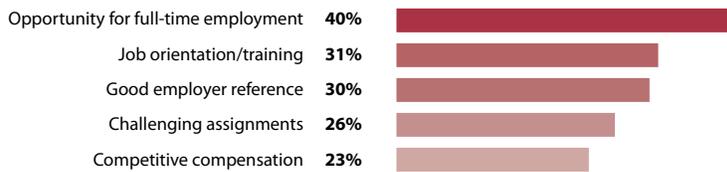
2008 survey respondent

"I feel that [Customs and Border Protection is] not as "prestigious" as I would like; they don't accept the best students in my opinion. I also feel that as interesting as the job may be, it would get redundant."

2008 survey respondent

FIGURE 7

## WHAT STUDENTS FIND MOST IMPORTANT IN AN INTERNSHIP



The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition, American Students

### Internships: Another lost opportunity?

Internships are important opportunities for students and employers; both get to “try each other on” during an internship. And, of course, happy former interns can be among the most effective “ambassadors” for an employer, as they tell their friends on campus about their good experiences. The flip side—unhappy interns—can be very damaging. Establishing and running an excellent internship program seems like a “no brainer” for smart employers.

Of all American students responding to the survey—freshmen through seniors—39 percent report having had an internship. Internships are important to respondents who are interested in government/public service (37 percent) and even more so to those interested in nonprofit or not-for-profit work (43 percent).

Students were asked what they find most important that an employer offers in an internship. Regardless of major field of study, all different student groups and majors cite “opportunity for full-time employment.” Students interested in government/public service feel slightly more strongly (41 percent versus 40 percent) about the importance of temporary to permanent job conversion.

Fortunately, mechanisms are already in place for agencies to capitalize on successful internships by hiring students. The federal Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) and the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) not only provide work experience that directly relates to a student’s academic program and career goals, but SCEP also allows for noncompetitive conversion to term, career or career-conditional appointments.

Students were asked “how should a company interact with [you] after the internship?” Of all students responding, 47 percent cite having a continued personal relationship with an internship mentor as most important. An exception is IT students who more highly value not hav-

ing to go through the formal recruitment process. Consistent post-internship communications are also highly valued.

What does this mean for federal employers, given the powerful potential of effective internships? Partnership research shows that, unfortunately, federal agencies are often not capitalizing upon the opportunities presented by their internships. Savvy agencies use internships as “pipelines” to get talented students from universities into their agencies. Then they use the “trial period” to identify students who should become permanent employees. Not enough agencies are doing this well. Given the potential for reducing recruiting costs and hiring tried-and-true talent to fill job demands, agencies would be wise to use their internship programs for all they can.

“[The IRS] would provide a steady work environment but does not offer a lot of the things my higher choices do, such as corporate culture, social responsibility, exciting assignments, and they have a negative reputation with the public.”

2008 survey respondent

# HOW AGENCIES CAN MEET GREAT EXPECTATIONS

## AGENCIES HAVE A GREAT DEAL TO OFFER STUDENTS: HOW TO MAKE THE CASE AND REACH STUDENTS

Translating data into effective tactical plans for good recruiting is not rocket science (except perhaps at NASA). What is basically involved is clear branding based on a clear understanding of what the organization is and offers; what students the agency wants to reach want; and good communication that gets that message to those students. The Universum USA survey provides important information that can help agencies meet their hiring goals by knowing and incorporating this information. The trick for federal agencies—who often have severely constrained recruiting resources—is to do what yields the best results. This means building knowledge of these preferences into their recruiting plans. Happily, the Universum USA study provides a great deal of critical information about where or to whom students go to get job-related information, and what they hope to hear or learn there.

“I would gladly give whatever aid I can to the future design of American defense, but I do not know enough about how to get involved with [DOD].”

2008 survey respondent

### Career fairs: Where lasting impressions are made

Students value career fairs as an important part of their job hunting process. When asked how they prefer to gather information about potential employers, 42 percent of all American undergrads cite career fairs. For engineering majors, the preference for career fairs is even higher—52 percent. Career fairs offer a unique opportunity for employers to connect with students: students form opinions about whether or not they are interested in an agency or company based on that company’s presentation and the effectiveness of their representatives at that fair. Do federal agencies recognize this? Do they act accordingly, using career fair opportunities to their fullest? Good recruiters need to use their time on campus wisely including meeting with professors and partnering with clubs to attract students to the career fairs. Federal agencies also can have an impact by being prepared with professional materials, having a clear message for students, presenting it crisply and following up afterward.

### Career fairs redux: More important for some student groups

Far and away, students who attend career fairs report they go to the ones sponsored or hosted by their university’s or department’s career center (73 percent). There are further variations by major area of study: students majoring in engineering and IT are much more likely to attend career fairs sponsored by professional organizations in their fields. This is less true for business, liberal arts and natural sciences majors.

TABLE 6  
HOW AMERICAN STUDENTS PREFER TO GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS

Communication Source	All Undergrads	Engineering	IT	Natural Sciences	Liberal Arts	Business
Career fairs	42%	52%	43%	40%	37%	42%
Internships/co-ops	32%	38%	33%	29%	29%	32%
Company Web sites	27%	29%	33%	25%	26%	27%
University career services department	20%	18%	15%	19%	22%	20%
Friends and family	20%	16%	16%	22%	22%	19%
Fellow students	19%	20%	22%	20%	18%	19%
Company presentations on campus	16%	19%	18%	13%	13%	19%
Career Web sites/Internet job boards	15%	11%	17%	16%	18%	14%

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition, American Students

Further, minority students are more likely to attend career fairs sponsored by minority organizations than to attend career fairs sponsored or hosted by their university. Examples include fairs held by the National Society of Black Engineers, the Asian Diversity Career Expo or the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers. African-American students are especially likely to follow this pattern, with many reporting attendance at career fairs sponsored by the NAACP and Urban League, or career fairs held in conjunction with other professional conferences.

These findings illustrate the importance for federal employers to carefully select the career fairs to attend to seek minority students. Federal agencies also should consider approaches that will appeal to minority students who cannot attend professional career fairs.

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#### No surprise: Students surf the Web

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The Universum USA survey indicates that the most popular source of information about job openings is the Internet. Thirty-one percent of students report learning about their ideal employers through company Web sites. From social networking applications to text messages, the students of today have access to means of communication not available to previous generations. The Universum USA survey confirms that employers cannot ignore this change, including the growing use of job posting Web sites. For example, 38 percent of students report visiting Monster.com to learn more about future employers, with Careerbuilder.com close behind at 31 percent. Federal agencies simply cannot rely solely upon USAJOBS.gov (OPM's job site for federal jobs) to post job announcements. Other important job online sites include the Web sites of university career centers (21 percent) and Facebook (20 percent).

Again, there are some variations by major regarding use of job Web sites. For example, 48 percent of IT students report visiting Monster.com, compared to 34 percent of engineering majors. However, 42 percent of those students expressing interest in a government/public service job after graduation report using Monster.com. Use of Web sites is relatively consistent for students by ethnicity, except that African-American students report that they use FastWeb more than reported by any other minority group.

“The [FBI] recruiter did not seem interested in people questions.”

2008 survey respondent

“The display that [NASA] had set up at the career fair was out of this world. Interesting both with different facts and figures about the company. Different job options.”

2008 survey respondent

“[The U.S. Army recruiter] was describing the exact kind of job I wanted. They personalized towards me.”

2008 survey respondent

“[The State Department recruiter] described all the opportunities for internships and steps to become a foreign service officer. They also were very passionate about what the foreign service meant to them as they told us about their experiences abroad.”

2008 survey respondent

**High-tech plus high-touch**

These findings seem to pull agency resources in two different directions: students prefer gathering information from career fairs, but actually make greater use of Web sites. What is the answer and how should agencies use each format?

Happily, the survey also shows what information students typically seek from different sources (table 6). Smart recruiters can tailor their approaches to use the most effective sources.

Web sites—the “high tech” side of recruiting—are very important sources of information for students seeking to learn about a company or agency. Millennials use technology extensively to perform research. But the “high touch” aspects of career fairs should not be over-looked in influencing student decisions and “sealing the deal.”

**Going beyond high-tech plus high-touch**

While career fairs and Web sites are undoubtedly key sources of information, students do not depend exclusively on them. Many sources are important. When looking for information about potential employers, students use what they learn in newspapers—most frequently school newspapers and publications (23 percent). The other media sources most frequently cited are other newspapers (New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today), major weekly newsmagazines (Newsweek, Time, Business Week) and local press. Getting information from fellow students and friends and family are important sources, too.

Understandably, there were variations in this area by major areas of study: 20 percent and 14 percent of engineering and IT majors, respectively, reported reading Popular

Science, while only four percent and three percent of liberal arts and business majors, respectively, cited that publication. Students expressing potential interest in government/public service were somewhat more likely to read and use the print media as an information source than students grouped by majors, but they too relied more often on Web sites and career fairs than on print media.

So, agencies planning to increase their visibility and name recognition with students should consider carefully whether and where to use their advertising dollars in the print media world.

**The campus career center should be an important partner in reaching students**

Campus career centers and career professionals are an important link between students and potential employers, but the resources available to students can vary greatly from school to school, and students do not use these options as much as they could. Specifically, career services rank 11th among sources actually used, with only 17 percent saying they had visited their campus career center to learn about a specific employer. However, 72 percent of students say that they have visited their campus career center at least once. Usage is especially strong for students majoring in engineering (78 percent) and business (79 percent), with many of them likely having access to specialized career services in their specific academic departments.

Although career services centers are generally well thought of, students are often not aware of the resources available and may therefore turn to other sources. Still, career services remain an important avenue for federal recruiters to find talent. That’s why building on-campus relationships should be part of an integrated, multi-pronged approach.

TABLE 7  
TYPES OF INFORMATION AMERICAN STUDENTS SEEK VIA DIFFERENT INFORMATION CHANNELS

Type of information students seek	Career fairs	Company Web sites	Employer presentations	Recruitment brochure
Internships	1 (50%)	3 (32%)	3 (29%)	3 (31%)
Current job openings	2 (47%)	1 (47%)	4 (28%)	4 (26%)
Job descriptions and requirements	3 (44%)	2 (42%)	1 (35%)	1 (38%)
Recruitment process	4 (33%)	8 (20%)	6 (24%)	5 (26%)
Salary and compensation package	5 (30%)	4 (31%)	2 (32%)	2 (34%)

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey 2008, Undergraduate Edition, American Students

## MEET STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS: PUT DATA INTO ACTION

Students have great expectations for the organizations they will consider as potential employers. Federal agencies can—and should—leverage the Universum USA data to improve their ability to meet those expectations and attract high-quality college talent. Based on the survey data, we identify many competitive advantages that federal agencies can highlight to better compete with the private and non-profit sectors. The Universum results show empirically that undergraduate students strongly value many attributes of federal employment. Characteristics such as high ethical standards and working for a cause may give agencies a head start against the competition—including against jobs that offer better pay.

Given that five of the best known federal agencies already rank among the top 15 ideal employers, it is clear that other federal agencies can also succeed in the battle for the right new talent. Agencies still have to be well-managed and offer meaningful work in an environment that enables employees to “do well” as well as to “do good.” But armed with information about what students want and how job candidates view federal agencies, savvy federal agencies can compete successfully. How should this be done?

1. **Appreciate who you're after.** This generation is not content with just “taking a job.” They want their employers to meet their needs. Private sector firms have this goal front-and-center as they recruit. Understand what students, especially those interested in public service, say they want, including work/life balance, opportunity to make a difference, an employer with high ethical standards and a good reputation. And then, give it to them!
2. **Target tough-to-find majors.** The Universum data show that government has the potential to successfully recruit students in technical majors like engineering and IT even though these students express less interest in government/public service. The key here is to make students aware of the exciting opportunities in government that meet their specific interests such as working on state-of-the-art projects, as NASA has already done successfully.
3. **Understand—and be honest about—where you lag.** Identify and fix your weaknesses. Use information such as *Best Places to Work* rankings, data from Universum, internal surveys of new hires and current and departing employees to find out what job applicants and your current employees think should be different. And then address those areas, improving the organization as you go.
4. **Determine what makes you unique.** Tell students who you are and what you do, highlighting how your work does indeed make a difference. Do this in a way that personalizes your work, to counter the image of the “faceless government bureaucrat.”
5. **Remember that pay is just one piece.** The Universum survey makes it clear that salary is not the only factor weighed by students, despite being a very important one. Emphasize longer-term earning potential and possibilities of rapid advancement. Use available flexibilities to hire new employees above the minimum pay, if appropriate. Supplement salary, where possible, with high levels of responsibility, attention to training and development, awards, hiring bonuses, loan repayment programs and other valuable benefits.
6. **Use high-tech, but don't diminish high-touch.** Universum results clearly show that your agency cannot afford to have a mediocre Web site. The Internet is a powerful tool with which to make job postings widely accessible and to convey vital information about and images of a potential employer. The Partnership's own [makingthedifference.org](http://makingthedifference.org) site for federal jobs has been designed to have the look, feel and functionality that appeal to young job seekers. But the screen cannot say it all. Students, especially Millennials, value the opportunity to meet with your representatives in person. They are accustomed to direct contact with information providers and to “being served” with the data they are seeking. You need to make the very most of any opportunity for face time. Use your current employees—especially your recent interns and new hires—as ambassadors to attract new ones. Send quality to attract quality.
7. **Study lost opportunities.** Find out where they are and figure out ways to turn them into successes. As the Universum survey shows, students view internships primarily as opportunities for permanent positions. Therefore, make the most of internships by offering successful interns permanent positions. Build on the capital you already have with students to elevate your image and enhance your appeal as an “ideal” employer.
8. **Improve your “Recruiting Return on Investment.”** Invest in your relationships with the colleges and universities that are educating the prospective employees you want. Career fairs are important to students, but they are only one part of a successful overall integrated campus strategy. Students want their employers to reach out to them, so devise unique ways to educate career services professionals, faculty and students—both about you as an employer and about why they should help you achieve your mission. And then prove it by hiring the best.

## METHODOLOGY AND REPORT CONTRIBUTORS

The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey is built through accumulated knowledge and experience from previous surveys, and also through input from students and academic research. The aim is to keep previous years' questions to detect changes over time, and also add new questions that reflect current issues and trends. The Universum IDEAL™ Employer Survey is comprised mainly of closed-ended questions. An extensive list of responses to each question is offered, including the option 'Other' with space for students to write in their own responses.

About 95 percent of the survey is conducted online; additional paper surveys are collected at key campuses. The online link is distributed to students via university contacts (mainly the career center, the academic departments and student associations), the Universum Panel and various local partners. Thus, in the convenient sample, most students are actively registered job seekers with the career center.

The employer list is a composition of Universum's knowledge of each market, evaluations of the last year's list, extensive market analysis complemented by information derived from discussions with clients, educational institutions, and students' "write-ins." The top 100 IDEAL™ Employers from the previous year's survey are automatically included. The survey respondents also have the chance to "write-in" and nominate organizations that they feel should be included in the list. The organizations which are most frequently written in are later considered as candidates for the employer list the coming year.

In regard to school selection, Universum works closely with corporate partners to gauge feedback on which campuses they recruit from via an annual Employer Feedback Survey. Each campus that is mentioned by five or more employers is invited to participate in the study. With this approach, Universum knows that the survey reaches the most "recruited-at" schools.

### SOME SURVEY FACTS

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Respondents to Universum's surveys are anonymous, and no personal records are kept. Responses are treated as an aggregate; no individual responses are studied.

The 2008 survey took about 25 minutes to complete. For taking the survey, students could choose to:

1. Donate life-saving vaccines to children in developing countries
2. Help slow down global warming by off-setting 150lbs of CO<sub>2</sub>
3. Donate \$5 to the U.S. Fund for UNICEF
4. Receive a \$5 gift certificate from GiveFun.com/Gifts.com

- Number of respondents: 43,313
- Number of American respondents: 31,876
- Number of undergraduate universities: 303
- Number of employers: 260
- Field period: December 2007 through April 2008

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