



CALL TO SERVE SPEAKERS BUREAU FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (AND ANSWERS!)

Q&A

Where can I learn more about finding and applying for government jobs and internships?

Please see the *Resources for Students and Jobseekers* worksheet.

Which internships, fellowships and student programs does the federal government offer?

On December 27, 2010, President Obama issued an Executive Order on recruiting and hiring students and recent graduates into the federal government. There are now three programs for these groups: The Internship Program, Recent Graduates Program and Presidential Management Fellows Program. Together, they will be known as the Pathways Programs. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) recently released the draft guidelines for these programs for public comment. Until these programs are officially implemented, the hiring authorities outlined below will remain in effect.

★ **Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP)**

- STEP is a traditional internship program and a great option for students seeking a summer or short-term experience
- All STEP internships are paid
- The length of STEP positions will be determined by agencies
- In order to be eligible for this program, students must be enrolled in an accredited degree-granting institution
- STEP internships are not required to be posted on USAJOBS.gov
- Individuals interested in applying for STEP positions should visit agency websites

★ **Student Career Experience Program (SCEP)**

- SCEP positions must be related to a student's field of study
- All SCEP internships are paid
- In order to be eligible for this program, students must be enrolled in an accredited degree-granting institution and the student's school must sign a formal agreement with the agency where he or she is interning
- SCEP interns who work at least 640 hours (or less depending on GPA and prior experience) will be eligible to be hired into an agency noncompetitively
- SCEP positions are not required to be posted on USAJOBS.gov
- Individuals interested in applying for SCEP positions should visit agency websites

★ **Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF)**

- The PMF program is the government's most prestigious fellowship program
- Students complete a 2-year rotation within an agency or between agencies as full-time fellows
- Students must apply during the fall of their final year of graduate school and obtain a master's degree in order to be eligible for the PMF program
- Additionally, candidates must be nominated by their academic institutions

- Visit pmf.opm.gov for more information about this program

★ **Agency-specific internships and fellowships**

- Search for the “careers” webpage on individual agency websites for agency-specific internship opportunities

When will the Pathways Programs be implemented?

We anticipate that the Pathways Programs will be implemented in early 2012. We will update you as we learn more.

I am already participating in a student program. Where can I learn more about how these changes will affect my status as a STEP, SCEP or FCIP participant?

Contact your supervisor or human resources office to learn more about your status. Additionally, visit opm.gov and ourpublicservice.org to read updates on the Pathways Programs as the regulations are released.

Beyond the new Pathways Programs, what other changes can applicants expect to see as a result of hiring reform?

Agencies have been working to streamline their hiring processes and to make them more applicant-friendly. As part of this reform effort, there are several changes, in particular, that you can expect to see when applying for federal positions.

- ★ Agencies will no longer be able to ask applicants to fill out KSAs during the first step of the application process.
- ★ Agencies must accept résumés and cover letters from applicants.
- ★ Agencies will improve the quality and speed of hiring.
- ★ Agencies will notify applicants about their status at four points during the process.

These changes, when combined with agencies’ efforts to make job opportunity announcements more concise and understandable, the new USAJOBS.gov, and other initiatives, should make applying for federal jobs and internships much easier for applicants.

To learn more about hiring reform, visit OPM’s webpage at opm.gov/hiringreform.

How will a federal pay freeze affect applicants?

While pay freezes are a reality, their effects are limited. To set the context, federal employees typically receive a percentage raise each year to reflect cost-of-living increases. Under a pay freeze, they will no longer get this raise. However, employees who are promoted between grades will still receive raises, and employees who receive step promotions within a grade may or may not get a salary increase.

How will a government hiring freeze affect applicants?

In terms of a federal hiring freeze, there is no policy which prevents agencies from hiring new employees. In fact, while hiring will be limited, there will still be a significant number of new employees hired into government by various agencies. It is, however, important to note that the effect of the hiring freeze will not be evenly distributed; some agencies will not be hiring at all, while others will continue to bring new staffers on board.

How does the federal government pay its employees?

At most federal agencies salaries are set by the General Schedule (GS), which goes from Grades 1-15. There are 10 steps within each grade and an individual moves through those steps based on the number of years he or she has worked in that grade or by promotion.

What is the GS grade for an entry-level job?

With an *associate's degree*, a student would typically be deemed a GS-4. With a *bachelor's degree*, a student would likely come in at a GS-5. With a *bachelor's degree and a high level of academic achievement*, a student might be eligible for a GS-7 at entry. Superior academic achievement is generally determined by class standing (upper third of class), GPA (3.0 or higher overall or 3.5 or higher in major), or honor society membership. Students should read the "Qualifications and Evaluations" tab in the job opportunity announcement carefully to determine whether or not they qualify for this status, and if they are not sure, they should contact the agency representative in charge of hiring for the position to which they are applying. This person's information can be found in the bottom right hand corner of the job opportunity announcement.

Finally, with a *master's degree*, a student is eligible to enter the government as a GS-9 and with a *doctorate*, as a GS-11.

How do agencies that *don't* use the GS pay their employees?

Agencies that do not use the GS use pay bands. Banded Systems create broader pay bands or "clusters" within which employees fall. They are less specific than the GS pay scale and are promotion-based. Each agency sets its own band expectations and salaries. Promotions are typically merit-based rather than seniority-based. Banded systems include a pay-for-performance system; bonuses and salary augmentations based on accomplishments and pay increases are not necessarily accompanied by promotions.

Agencies that do not use the GS should be able to explain how their pay scale overlays on top of or correlates to the GS. Some agencies that use pay bands include: Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Government Accountability Office (GAO), Intelligence Community (IC) agencies, Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST).

What is the difference between competitive and excepted service?

Competitive civil service positions are filled according to a merit system where the best qualified candidates are chosen based on an application and interview process. Managers can hire a current federal employee (promotion or transfer) or someone from outside of the federal government. These positions must be posted on [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov)!

Excepted service is a special authority used by the federal government which allows agencies to use a streamlined hiring process rather than hiring through the traditional competitive process. This authority allows agencies to help meet an unusual or special hiring need. The excepted service authority is also used to fill a job under a special circumstance; for example, when there is a part-time or temporary job in a remote location or when there is a critical hiring need. Additionally, the Office of Personnel Management may use a special hiring authority on a case-by-case basis to make a political appointment. Special hiring authorities can also be used to hire applicants with disabilities.

Certain excepted service hiring authorities, generally referred to as the Pathways Programs, are used as fast-track ways to bring talented individuals in at the entry levels.

Excepted service positions are not required to be posted on [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov). Accordingly, it is important to look at individual agency websites for job announcements.

Do I have to work in D.C. if I want to work for the federal government?

Absolutely not! Only 16 percent of federal jobs are located in the Washington, D.C. metro area. There are also 50,000 federal jobs overseas. Most federal agencies have regional offices located throughout the country. Many agencies and departments are hiring new employees in these offices. This means that students can stay close to home or move to a part of the country that they have always wanted to live in!

What federal jobs are available in this area?

On [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov) students can use the “Search Jobs” tab to look for jobs by location, as well as a variety of other criteria including agency, job category and salary range/GS grade. Additionally, users can save their searches and have relevant positions emailed to them automatically.

What does the federal job application process entail?

There are four primary components of the federal application process that you should be familiar with when applying for government positions. These include the federal résumé, assessments, interviews and security clearances.

What is a federal résumé? Is it different than a private sector résumé?

Federal résumés are quite different from private sector résumés. First of all, they are longer; federal résumés range from one to five pages in length. These documents require more detail and leave little room for individualized formatting or creativity. Examples of the additional details that must be put on federal résumés include coursework and specifics about work experience, such as dates and number of hours worked per week, as well as supervisor contact information.

Moreover, students should tailor their résumés to meet the needs listed in the job opportunity announcement. Because there is space for additional detail, students should take advantage of the opportunity to expand upon their accomplishments and make themselves stand out.

One of the best features of [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov) is that users can create up to five federal résumés, each tailored to a different position. Students interested in applying for different types of jobs can create several résumés and apply for various openings without having to create a new résumé for each job posting.

What is a KSA? Are these essays required on every federal application?

Federal application essays are often referred to as “KSAs,” which stands for knowledge, skills and abilities. The purpose of these questions is to determine what makes an applicant stand out in a particular area. Therefore, applicants should emphasize how they can and will perform specific tasks associated with duties of a job, as well as how they will use their skills and experiences to succeed in a position. It is extremely important that applicants root themselves in the description of duties and responsibilities that appear in the job announcement. Oftentimes, HR specialists will run keyword searches and by using words found in the job description, they will be sure to grab readers’ attention.

There is no set number of KSAs for each position and therefore, the number will vary by agency and opening. Generally speaking, there are usually three to seven that need to be filled out for each application.

As a result of hiring reform, agencies can no longer ask applicants to fill these essays out during the first step of the application process. Therefore, agencies are increasingly turning to questionnaires to assess applicants at this stage.

Is a federal interview different than a private sector interview?

While interviewing with federal agencies involves many of the same interview techniques that you would use for private sector jobs, including doing one's homework on the agency and dressing the part, there is one key difference that applicants should be aware of and prepared for. Arrive early! Individuals must remember to be prompt as they will almost always have to go through agency security. Additionally, remind students to be enthusiastic about an agency's work and to express their interest in an agency's mission.

How long does the hiring process take?

While every agency has different hiring practices, agencies are moving towards an 80-day hiring model, meaning that they will identify and fill a position in this timeframe. Accordingly, if a student does not hear back from an agency within 20 days after the closing date, they should contact the agency representative in charge of hiring for the position to which they are applying.

It is important to note that this person's name will appear at the bottom of the application on USAJOBS.gov.

Does the government offer student loan repayment assistance?

Yes, the government does offer student loan repayment assistance. Federal agencies are authorized to provide up to \$10,000 in student loan repayment assistance per employee each year for federally insured student loans with a total lifetime cap of \$60,000 per employee, provided that an individual signs a three-year contract with that agency (this is the standard, however, some agencies use a slightly different model). The average repayment is about \$6,000 per year, and generally these payments go to hard-to-fill or hard-to-retain positions. Students should check with agencies to determine whether or not they offer this assistance and for what positions.

What is the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program?

Public Service Loan Forgiveness is a new program for federal student loan borrowers who work in "public service" jobs including positions in government and nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations. It will forgive remaining debt after 10 years of eligible employment and qualifying loan payments, which include federal Stafford, Grad PLUS and consolidation loans as long as they are part of the Direct Loan program.

Only payments made *after* October 1, 2007 count towards the 10 years (120 monthly payments, not necessarily consecutive) required for Public Service Loan Forgiveness. To count, these payments must be made while an individual is working full-time in an eligible position. It is important to note that this loan forgiveness program will only benefit people who still owe money on their federal loans after 10 years of eligible payments and employment. For more information about this program, students should visit <http://www.ibrinfo.org/index.php> and search for "Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program."

What does the security clearance process entail?

A basic background check of the individual's criminal and credit histories will be run on all applicants. After an offer is extended, a more extensive background investigation will take place. This check may or may not yield a security clearance depending on the nature of the position.

When it comes to security clearances, being honest is more important than having a spotless record. Past mistakes will be considered on a case-by-case basis, but falsification of records will almost certainly disqualify an applicant for a position.

If students are applying for positions that will require a security clearance, they should begin filling out the SF-85 or SF-86. One of these two documents will be required for those applicants who need a clearance. If applicants are prepared with the appropriate documentation, it will help to expedite the process once they are hired.

What is veterans' preference? How does it work?

Veterans' Preference was established by Congress to recognize those who have served our country and, in doing so, have suffered economic loss and, in some cases, have become disabled. It is designed to give veterans extra assistance when competing for federal jobs.

Typically veterans must have served on active duty for at least two years during a period of war or be disabled in order to be eligible for Veterans' Preference. Veterans receive an additional 5 to 10 points which is added to their total application score. *Having veterans' preference does not guarantee veterans jobs.*

What does it mean when the job vacancy announcement's 'Who May Apply' section says "all sources" or "status applicants" and/or "reinstatement eligibles"?

According to the Office of Personnel Management, these are groups of individuals that an agency will identify as those from which it will accept applications to compete for its vacancies.

When a vacancy is open to "all sources," it means that anyone can apply. While there are no restrictions on the groups of candidates who may apply to these types of announcements, in most cases, U.S. citizenship is required. In rare cases, agencies may hire certain non-citizens when there are no qualified U.S. citizens available, unless the appointment is prohibited by statute.

"Status applicants" refers to those individuals who are current or former federal civilian employees who hold or held non-temporary appointments in the competitive service, not the excepted service.

Reinstatement eligibility refers to the ability of those individuals who previously held a career or career-conditional appointment to apply for jobs in the competitive federal service open to status applicants. There is no time limit on reinstatement eligibility for those who either have veterans' preference, or acquired career tenure by completing three years of substantially continuous creditable service.

If I have several years of work experience, will I have to come in at Step 1 of any position I apply for?

Before individuals accept a position, they should negotiate with the agency recruiter to see if they can come in at a higher step. It is important to note that applicants will not automatically get a bump in the steps simply because they have experience, so it pays (literally) to ask!

How hard is it to switch to another agency if I decide that the one I joined no longer suits me or I want additional experience unavailable at my current agency?

In most cases, employees who work for the federal government for at least three years will become eligible for noncompetitive appointment, meaning that they can be hired into a new position with their agency or a new agency without going through the traditional hiring process.

Will agencies invest in my professional development and/or pay for graduate work?

Federal agencies provide a wide variety of training and professional development opportunities. Not only do employees have access to on-the-job training and seminars, but many agencies will also pay for employees to take relevant graduate school courses or pay for them to attend graduate school.

Where can midcareer applicants find more information about the benefits of federal employment?

Midcareer applicants interested in learning more about the benefits of federal employment should visit [opm.gov](https://www.opm.gov) and more specifically, the Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance page, as well as [dol.gov](https://www.dol.gov) to view the Family and Medical Leave Act. Both of these sites contain a variety of information about federal benefits and should be considered carefully when applying for federal jobs.