

Middle Class Proposal #7

Building Better Government with New Talent

Not everyone loves government, but many people forget the essential role that government plays to ensure the basic safety, security and success of the American people. Federal workers man the front lines on the fight against terrorism, drugs, organized crime and securing the borders. They ensure food safety, combat identity theft, send satellites into space, forecast the weather, respond to emergencies and keep our air and water clean. But there is a shortage of new, young, high-quality people who want to make government a career. A new public service scholarship that provides young people with real college aid in exchange for significant federal service can attract a new generation of qualified, dedicated—and needed—public servants.

THE PROBLEM

New challenges and a crisis in recruitment

Federal employees design buildings, prosecute criminals, monitor air traffic, inspect our food supplies, ensure the safety of new drugs, carry out lifesaving research and perform countless other services that ensure the safety, security and success of the American public. But today, a dwindling number of young and talented people are heeding the call to government service and instead opting for more lucrative and seemingly exciting careers. As a result, the federal government is slowly, but inexorably aging, even as the challenges facing our country grow.

The federal workforce is gray and getting grayer.

By 2012, fully one-third of the current federal workforce will be eligible for retirement. Three in five federal workers is currently over the age of 45, and the average age of all federal workers is 46.¹ Compared to the private sector where only two in five workers is over the age of 45 and the average age of a private sector employee is less than 40, the federal workforce is significantly more gray.²

Pending worker shortages could threaten national security and public safety.

As early as next year, more than one in ten air traffic controllers, more than one in ten border patrol agents and two in ten criminal investigators at the FBI will be eligible for retirement.³ In addition to these pending vacancies, the federal government is short of highly skilled workers in information technology, science, engineering and foreign language fluency. The average age for language specialists in the Department

of Defense is 51.⁴ All told, the federal government will need to fill as many as 193,000 high-level positions by 2009 to keep the government functioning well.⁵

Young people are increasingly rejecting careers in government service.

The federal workforce is among the most highly-educated in the country, with 42% of federal workers having college degrees or more. The average salary is good—over \$60,000—but federal employee salaries are capped well below what senior people in the private sector can make.⁶ Nonetheless, the federal workforce includes such highly skilled professionals such as attorneys, physicians, nurses, engineers, veterinarians, scientists and accountants.

Yet because of the perception that government work is less exciting and has less room for advancement, few college graduates are opting for a career in the federal government—only 3% of the federal workforce is under the age of 25.⁷

THE SOLUTION

Building Better Government with a New, Competitive Public Service Scholarship

Congress should create a new public service scholarship program that would provide 10,000 graduating high school seniors each year with a \$40,000 competitive scholarship over four years for tuition, books, room and board in exchange for five years of service in the federal government upon graduation.

The scholarships would help inspire a new generation of public servants.

Young people now believe that the private sector offers more opportunities to get ahead than government. One poll found that more than 60% of college juniors and seniors believe their career advancement in government would be limited, compared to the private sector.⁸ But at the same time, only 13% said they were particularly knowledgeable about the kinds of jobs that were available.⁹

By creating a highly competitive, prestigious scholarship, this program can both raise awareness of careers in government service while attracting top-notch talent. To attract top students, the scholarships can be structured to include mentoring during the school year, summer internships and opportunities for scholarship winners to meet and learn from each other. Upon graduation, students would enter a pool of workers who would either “bid” for positions or be assigned to rotations in the federal agencies where they are most needed and where their skills would be appropriate.

The scholarships can help more middle-class students afford college.

College tuitions have risen faster than inflation for each of the past 27 years. One year’s tuition at a public university now costs \$12,796 on average.¹⁰ At a private school, the bill is \$30,367.¹¹ More students are also graduating with debt and with higher debt burdens. Two out of three college graduates today are graduating with debt,¹² and the average student debt burden in 2004 was \$21,087.¹³

By targeting first-generation college-goers, minorities and middle-class families, these scholarships have the potential to make college affordable for families who would otherwise face crushing burdens of debt—or opt not to send their child to college at all.

The scholarships would build better government.

No matter how people feel about government, they all want government to perform better and attract new talent. Some of what the government does is very rote, but much of what government does is highly skilled and very difficult. We need to make a concerted effort to attract the best and the brightest so America can meet the challenges we face here at home and abroad—cleaning up our lakes, rivers, streams, and oceans, fighting terrorism, opening export opportunities for business, spending taxpayer dollars wisely, sending satellites into space, and the like. As a highly competitive scholarship, this program would attract the best.

The scholarships would expand upon existing government programs, which are currently fragmentary and too small to meet the government’s hiring needs.

At the graduate student level, the highly successful Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program, created in 1977, places nearly 800 graduate students a year in management positions at federal agencies.¹⁴

The PMF program, however, is not open to undergraduates, for whom scholarship opportunities are currently very limited. A variety of federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration now run small-scale programs that range in size from as few as two scholarships per year to about 150.¹⁵ Information about these scholarship programs is not widespread, however, and the expertise required is often highly specific.

The Public Service Scholarship program would greatly expand the number of undergraduate scholarship opportunities available, create a single portal for agencies to find qualified recruits and eliminate the need for students to apply to multiple programs at separate agencies.

THE ROLLOUT

Ideas for launching and publicizing the Public Service Scholarship Program

- **Hold a press conference** at a local high school with college-bound seniors and their parents or at a local university with college students and their families.
- **Release a short report** documenting the pending shortage in federal workers, the types of careers available in the federal government and the impacts on national security, public safety and economic growth if the federal government’s hiring needs are not met.

CRITIQUES & RESPONSES

Public Service Scholarships

It's too expensive.

This program could be fully paid for by cutting pork barrel spending by a mere 5%. Instead of money going to wasteful projects that no one wants, we should invest in young people who have the potential to do great things for America.

Why not expand student loan forgiveness programs?

Providing scholarships on the front end has a number of advantages. First, students will enter college having made a commitment to government service upon graduation. They will be part of a class of committed students and enrolled in a structured program that will provide a wide variety of opportunities for learning and advancement. Second, the prospect of incurring large amounts of student debt discourages some students from attending the college of their choice or going to college at all. Scholarships eliminate the anxiety of incurring debt and can open the door of opportunity to students who would otherwise not consider going to college.

This program is unnecessary.

The federal government is facing serious worker shortages that could have real impact on the safety, security and success of the American public. The jobs the government needs to fill include border patrol agents, criminal investigators, attorneys, Arabic speakers, cyber-crime specialists and other high-skilled and high-profile professions.

Workers at federal agencies are on the front lines working for the American public every day. Without a new generation of talent to fill these positions, our country will be less prepared to fight terrorism, keep our borders safe, ensure public safety and meet the many new challenges of this century.

This proves that you are a big government liberal.

This is not about bigger government, but better government.

APPENDIX

Details of the Public Service Scholarship Program Proposal

The Public Service Scholarship Program is modeled after such existing high-profile scholarship programs as the Presidential Management Fellows program for graduate students and the Morehead Scholarship program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, among others.

This program would combine a rigorous application process with a structured undergraduate that includes mentoring opportunities, summer internships and workshops.

Commitment to government service:

- Each scholarship winner will commit to five years of federal service upon graduation. Failure to complete this commitment will convert the scholarship funds awarded into a loan (on a pro rata basis depending on the amount of service completed).
- Upon graduation, students will enter a pool of available talent and can either bid for a placement at a desired agency or be assigned to an agency depending on the agency's need and the worker's expertise.
- All placements will be in highly skilled or managerial positions with opportunities for advancement.

Scholarship:

- Each scholarship recipient will receive \$10,000 per year for four years, applicable to tuition, fees, books, room and board and other incidental educational expenses.
- Scholarships will be awarded to 10,000 graduating high school seniors per year on the basis of academic achievement and merit. Special consideration will be given to outstanding candidates who are first-generation college students, minorities or who have demonstrated financial need.

Cost:

- \$400 million per year to fund 40,000 scholarships per year.

Endnotes

¹ Partnership for Public Service, *Where the Jobs Are, Mission Critical Opportunities* 2007, available at <http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=118>.

² Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections Program, Table 6 (The average age of all workers, public and private, is 40.8).

³ Partnership for Public Service, *Where the Jobs Are, Mission Critical Opportunities* 2007, available at <http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=118>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Office of Personal Management, *Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics, The Fact Book 2005 Edition*, February 2006, available at <http://www.opm.gov/feddata/factbook/2005/factbook2005.pdf>.

⁷ Partnership for Public Service, *Back to School: Rethinking Federal Recruiting on College Campuses* 2006, available at <http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=45>.

⁸ Bilmes, L., and Gould, S., "Getting the Federal Workers We Need," *Washington Post*, August 31, 2005, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/30/AR2005083001551.html>.

⁹ Partnership for Public Service, *Back to School: Rethinking Federal Recruiting on College Campuses*, May 2006, available at <http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=45>.

¹⁰ College Board, *Trends in College Pricing 2006*, available at http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost06/trends_college_pricing_06.pdf

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Project on Student Debt, *High Hopes, Big Debts*, available at [http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/File/High_Hopes_Big_Debts\(1\).pdf](http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/File/High_Hopes_Big_Debts(1).pdf). See also Berkner, L., et al., *2003-04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04) Undergraduate Financial Aid Estimate for 2003-04 by Type of Institution*, National Center for Education Statistics, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=31>.

¹³ Calculations by the Project on Student Debt from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2004 undergraduates, Data Analysis System (DAS).

¹⁴ Making the Difference, *Federal Student Employment Programs*, available at <http://www.makingthedifference.org/federalinternships/employmentprograms.shtml>

¹⁵ Examples include the USDA 1890 National Scholars Program, which offers full-tuition scholarships to two students who are majoring in agricultural subjects at each of the 17 Black Land-Grant Institutions, the NIH Undergraduate Scholarship Program, which offers \$20,000 scholarships to 15 students from a disadvantaged background, and the NOAA Ernest F. Hollings Undergraduate Scholarship Program, which offers \$8,000 awards to approximately 100 students majoring in oceanic or atmospheric fields.