Phi Beta Kappas View Federal Employment

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The Public Manager,
Vol 5, No. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 36-40.

A preliminary version of this article was presented to the annual conference of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, Boise, Idaho; October 17, 1998

Abstract

Federal civil service employment does not evoke favorable impressions among most Phi Beta Kappas, according to this nationwide survey of 605 college seniors who belong to the academic honor society. Most ΦBKs envision good benefits and job security, but not much else that is positive about Federal employment. Yet, some ΦBKs (13%) are attracted to working for the Federal government. Those who are most eager particularly want to “have a real impact on national issues” and believe Federal jobs will enable them to do that. Compared to other ΦBKs, those who are attracted to Federal employment are particularly likely to view Federal starting salaries and advancement opportunities in an acceptable light. Interest is significantly stronger among ΦBKs who majored in political science or a closely related field, and among those who have friends and relatives who work for the Federal government. However, large numbers of interested ΦBKs say they have no idea how to apply for a Federal job and assume it is a “long and burdensome” process.

The research was supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted in collaboration with the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration and the Trachtenberg School at the George Washington University. The researchers owe additional thanks to Michael Brintnall, Amy Downey, Elizabeth Hubbard, Kathryn Newcomer, Paul Light, and Phi Beta Kappa.
A Quiet Crisis?

In 1986, Charles Levine and Rosslyn Kleeman saw the Federal government as having increasing problems in attracting and retaining talented and motivated college graduates. They feared that “the situation may be sufficiently dire that the civil service is experiencing what amounts to a ‘quiet crisis’ that if left unattended could produce major breakdowns in government performance in the future.”

These concerns did not originate in the 1980s. In 1964, for example, a Brookings Institution study forecasted that the Federal government would face serious problems competing with business to hire the highly skilled workers that both sectors would need. Despite such early warnings, by the late 1980s, the “quiet crisis” was becoming a little louder. For example, one study (Johnston, 1988) projected the need for a more highly trained and specialized Federal workforce but predicted an increasing shortage of qualified, hireable candidates in the decade ahead. Other researchers, such as Ronald Sanders (1989), also pointed to difficulties in appealing to high-caliber college graduates.

The most prominent findings were presented by the National Commission on the Public Service, headed by Paul Volcker. The “Volcker Commission” found “an erosion of student interest in public life.” Among other things, the Commission concluded (p. 26):

“According to the Commission’s sample of honor society students, the public service is not perceived as a place where talented people can get ahead. Few of the top graduates feel the Federal government can offer good pay and recognition for performance. Fewer still say a Federal job can be challenging and intellectually stimulating.”

Such concerns have not disappeared. In 1998, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) assembled an Advisory Council on Public Service Careers to explore ways to sustain and invigorate student interest in careers in public service. NASPAA also convened a Task Force for Public Service and Public Service Education.

The precise extent to which there has been, is, or soon may be a “quiet crisis” in attracting talented students to Federal jobs is a serious question but is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, this research was designed to contribute to this discussion by analyzing how academically successful students view careers in the Federal government – whether or not the situation is now at a “crisis” level. Consequently, the findings reported in this article address two fundamental questions:

(1) How do academically successful college seniors such as Phi Beta Kappas view typical Federal civil service jobs?

(2) What factors most influence Phi Beta Kappas to want to work in the Federal government?

“Academically successful” was operationalized as membership in Phi Beta Kappa, widely recognized for honoring academic achievement. ΨBK was also selected because it is the same liberal arts honor society that was studied by the Volcker Commission ten years earlier.

Data Collection

To identify plausible motivating factors (both pro and con) for careers in the Federal government, an extensive review of previous research was undertaken. Factors cited most often by Kilpatrick, et al. (1964), Levine and Kleeman (1986), Johnston (1988), the Volker Commission (1988), and Sanders (1989)
focused on issues of salary, benefits, advancement, security, autonomy, altruism, and efficiency, and sometimes referenced such matters as diversity, prestige, recognition, and co-workers.

To probe these issues and to search for any additional motivating factors not cited in the literature, nine focus groups were held at the Catholic University of America (CUA); George Washington University (GWU); University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UM,BC); and University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT,K).1

Because of the public service implications of this research, the executive committee of Phi Beta Kappa reviewed the survey and approved its distribution to ΦBK members. In 1998, the questionnaire was mailed to ΦBKs, most of whom were undergraduate seniors.2 A total of 605 ΦBKs participated in this survey, a good response rate (41%) for a mail questionnaire.

Impressions of Federal Jobs

To add clarity regarding Federal civil service jobs, the instrument underscored the following:

“This survey seeks your impressions of working for the Federal government (but not in the military and not as an elected politician) in jobs where recent college graduates might be employed.”

With that preface, ΦBKs were asked to rate 21 job-related factors in terms of “how typical do you think this is of a Federal government job.” Each factor was rated on a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very” typical. Figure 1 reports the percent of ΦBKs who ranked each factor as “very” or “mostly” typical of Federal jobs (i.e., the two most favorable scores on the five point scale).

Federal jobs are widely viewed among ΦBKs as providing attractive benefits (82%) and job security (67%). In the words of one GWU focus group participant, you would get good “benefits and job security” and are “not likely to lose your job.” However, far fewer ΦBKs presume that the starting salary (18%) or subsequent salary increases (30%) are attractive. “Money is better in the private sector,” commented another student, without prompting dissent in the focus group.

About half of the ΦBKs gave Federal jobs credit for workplace diversity (52%), “opportunities for career advancement” (52%), and “supportive family leave policies” (51%).

The most negative scores reflected the apparently widespread assumption that Federal workers wear bureaucratic straightjackets leaving little room to maneuver. Only 4% thought that a typical Federal job held by college graduates would allow “freedom to do your job your own way.” Similarly, only 11% expected such a job to have “efficient procedures” for work.
Students in the UT,K focus group nodded in agreement when one said, “I think of the Federal government as a big bureaucracy that is not very efficient.” Likewise, a GWU student said sarcastically, “Charting the course of government? I don’t think so.”

Federal workers themselves did not have a particularly positive reputation among most ØBKs. Only 21% envisioned them as “capable co-workers.” In that vein, a UM,BC student commented, “A lot of people who get jobs with the Federal government for life are just fixtures there and they aren’t real productive.” In addition, ØBKs did not expect to find much in the way of a close office family among Federal workers. Only 30% anticipate a setting with “congenial social relations at the office” and just 15% expect to find “strong relations with co-workers outside the office.” A GWU student contended, “You don’t find as much collaboration in government work as you do in the private sector.”

Do typical Federal workers make a difference in society? Most ØBKs do not think so. As one student put it, “Most of it is just people pushing paper” (UT,K). Only 38% believe typical Federal jobs “have a real impact on national issues”; only 33% say such jobs offer “opportunities to make the world better”; and just 29% believe they provide “chances to help other people directly.” Consistent with this skepticism, one GWU senior asserted:

“Maybe one in a thousand people turns out to be that shining star, but that [is] a rare case... I just don’t think that they make a difference in most Federal jobs.”

Another added:

“I’d feel like I was making copies of the posters for the rallies to save the whales – rather than being on the boat and saving the whales.”

Opinions are mixed as to whether most Federal jobs are more suitable for those who prefer a laid-back setting or for those who thrive in a more demanding atmosphere. Three out of ten (29%) characterized the jobs as “mostly low-pressure,” but (while not a precise opposite) “challenging work” was envisioned by four out of ten (40%). Focus group participants tended to share the view of the student who argued that “private sector organizations have a greater amount of dynamism” than those in the public sector.

Finally, while 52% expect Federal jobs to offer “opportunities for career advancement,” fewer believe that the rewards and recognition are “merit-based” (27%) or that advancements are accompanied by “personal growth and new skills” (22%).

The Appeal of Federal Careers

Given these impressions of working for the Federal government, how many ØBKs exhibit interest in such a career path? An affinity scale was created to calibrate their interest.

**Stalwarts.** A total of 13% of the ØBKs said that working for the Federal government was “very appealing” and/or that it was their top preference over other options (state or local government, non-profits, business and the private sector). These pro-Federal ØBKs are termed “Stalwarts.” (See Figure 2.)

**Sympathizers.** Altogether, 14% of the ØBKs consider a Federal job “fairly appealing” and ranked it as their second choice. These students are designated “Sympathizers.” A few seniors were struggling with the decision. One said, “I’m graduating in May and I’m trying to decide if I want to go into the private or public sector. Do I want to go into government service?”

**Skeptics.** All those who consider such a job less appealing and give it a lower priority – but do say that “at some point” they would be willing to “consider working for the Federal government” – were classified as “Skeptics.” They constituted 38% of the ØBKs.
Scorners. Those who did not expect to ever even “consider working for the Federal government” at any time during their career comprised 35% of the ΦBKs. These ΦBKs were labeled “Scorners.”

Predicting Affinity by Congruence Scores

What values and perceptions predict affinity for Federal careers among ΦBKs? Affinity cannot be predicted by knowing what ΦBKs think of the Federal government on the 21 factors reviewed above – because a particular factor may or may not be important to a particular ΦBK. Nor is knowing ΦBK career priorities sufficient, because ΦBKs disagree as to whether Federal jobs would satisfy those priorities.

What does matter is the congruence between their personal priorities and their perception of the Federal government. “Congruence scores” were calculated as the perception of Federal jobs on a specific criterion weighted by the importance each ΦBK senior assigns to that criterion. That multiplication produces a low congruence score if a factor is either unimportant to a ΦBK or if Federal jobs are seen as falling short on that factor. Conversely, the highest congruence score occurs when a factor is both identified as “very” important to a ΦBK’s career and believed to be “very” characteristic of typical Federal jobs.

Impact National Issues. Using standard stepwise multiple regression, three congruence scores emerged as the most powerful attitudinal predictors. As shown in Table 1, by far, the strongest predictor is congruence on having “a real impact on national issues.” ΦBK seniors who want to make a difference on society and who believe that the Federal government provides a serious chance to do that are far more inclined to want a Federal career than are other ΦBKs.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting ΦBK Affinity for Federal Jobs</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact natl. issues</td>
<td>.301</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good starting salary</td>
<td>.148</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.0010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate major</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/family in field</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>.0001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple Correlation Coefficient: .51 (n=570)</td>
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When the relationship is examined more closely, it appears even stronger than the multiple correlation coefficient (multiple R) suggests. As illustrated in Figure 3, when this personal value (wanting to impact national issues) converged with the perception that Federal jobs often provide that opportunity, then about half or more of these ΦBKs wanted to work for the Federal government (i.e., Stalwarts). In sharp contrast, none of the ΦBKs who wanted very much to have an impact on national issues – but who saw Federal jobs as ultimately inconsequential – had an interest in Federal careers.

Starting Salary. Stalwart ΦBKs did not want to take vows of poverty in order to make a difference on national issues. Those who wanted an “attractive starting salary” – and did not consider starting Federal salaries to be as low as did other ΦBKs – were more inclined toward Federal jobs. While some analysts have dismissed financial incentives as a motivating
factor, these findings show that among these ΦBKs it was a significant predictor that offered additional explanatory power, independent of “impacting national issues.”

This does not mean that the Stalwarts imagined that they would soon become wealthy on a Federal payroll. Few said a good starting salary was “very” typical of a Federal job. However, Stalwarts tended to believe it was at least “somewhat” typical of Federal jobs – not “slightly” or “not at all” typical as Scorners tended to assert. One interpretation is that Stalwarts seemed to be satisfied with a secure, middle-class standard-of-living and believed that a Federal job would provide it. The Skeptics and Scorners tended to want more and believed that Federal jobs delivered less.

Career Advancement Opportunities. The third major attitudinal predictor was congruence on the desire for “opportunities for career advancement” and the belief that such opportunities were available in typical Federal jobs. The ΦBKs who found Federal jobs most appealing envisioned that they could effectively climb its career ladder.5

Three Dimensions. The top three attitudinal factors that predict affinity for Federal jobs thus span the dimensions of altruism, affluence, and actualization: (1) Altruism. “Have a real impact on national issues” correlates with – but is much stronger in its predictive power than – “make the world better” and “help other people directly.” (2) Affluence. “Attractive starting salary” correlates with – but is a notably stronger predictor than – “attractive benefits,” “salary increases,” and “job security.” (3) Actualization. “Career advancement opportunities” is a more potent predictor than other actualization factors it somewhat correlates with such as “personal growth and new skills” and “challenging work.”

Contextual Predictors

The ΦBK survey revealed additional dynamics beyond the convergence of value priorities and Federal perceptions. After entering the opinion variables first, the stepwise multiple regression process next allowed demographic and other contextual variables to compete for additional explanatory power. In addition to the three key opinion factors, two notable contextual variables emerged.

While demographics such as sex, race, and region were not strong enough to enter the regression equation, two factors did independently contribute additional predictive power. The two factors were the student’s undergraduate major and knowing Federal workers personally.

Undergraduate Major. Major (grouped into three tiers in terms of proximity to political science) offers significant additional explanatory power beyond that of the three leading opinion measures in the regression equation. The bivariate relationship between major and Federal career affinity is also dramatic.

ΦBK political science majors (used here as the umbrella term for political science as well as government, public affairs, and international affairs) were not all dreaming of law school. Regarding working for the Federal government, about half were Stalwarts (30%) or Sympathizers (17%). In contrast, fewer than one-third of the other social science majors were Stalwarts (14%) or Sympathizers (17%) regarding Federal employment. And, only about one-fifth of all
other majors combined were either Stalwarts (9%) or Sympathizers (12%).

**Federal Friends.** Another contextual factor that surfaced in the regression analysis, independent of the attitudinal predictors, was the extent to which \( \Phi BKs \) knew people who work for the Federal government. Despite anecdotes about dissatisfied Federal workers, they are not communicating much dissatisfaction to \( \Phi BK \) students they know. It turned out that simply having Federal workers as family and friends correlates significantly and positively with favorable dispositions toward working for the Federal government.

On a variable that ranged from zero to three, \( \Phi BKs \) were scored as to whether Federal workers were (1) members of their immediate family, (2) other relatives, and/or (3) good personal friends. Familiarity did not breed contempt. \( \Phi BK \)s who were surrounded by Federal workers in all three categories were two and one half times more likely to be at least sympathetic toward Federal careers than were those with no such personal contacts (49% vs. 20%, respectively).

**Impediments**

Just because some \( \Phi BK \) seniors say they would like to work for the Federal government does not mean that they ultimately will. The survey found two strong impediments to converting abstract interest into actual jobs: (1) Many \( \Phi BKs \) have no idea how to pursue a Federal job. (2) Many \( \Phi BKs \) suppose that applying for a Federal job is a “long, burdensome process.”

**Uncertain Steps.** The relevant agree/neutral/disagree statement was phrased this way:

“If I wanted a job with the Federal government, I would know how to go about getting one.”

Among all \( \Phi BKs \), only 36% agreed. More crucially, among the Stalwarts (who theoretically aspire to a Federal career) only 41% agreed. Thus, a majority of the \( \Phi BK \) seniors most amenable to a Federal job did not know how to begin to go about getting one.

Seniors viewed campus recruiters as accelerating the process of getting a job, but none of the students in the nine focus groups observed much happening in the way of recruitment for Federal jobs.

“I’ve never heard of a Federal government job recruiter coming to campus.”

(UT, K)

“There are applications for government jobs on campus, but I’ve never seen a Federal recruiter on campus.” (GWU)

“I don’t know how to find a government job. I’m utilizing the campus job search.”

(UT, K)

**Long, Burdensome Process.** Another statement which revealed a serious impediment was worded as follows: “Applying for a Federal job is a long, burdensome process.” Few \( \Phi BKs \) said “disagree.” Only 11% disagreed that it was “a long, burdensome process.” The rest were divided between those who “agreed” (41%) and those who took the in-between position or were uncertain (48%).

The results were not much different among the Stalwarts. While they might have wanted to have a real impact on national issues via a Federal career, only 17% think that securing such a job would not be a “long, burdensome process.” A plurality (43%) believe the process is an onerous one. Others take an intermediate view or are not sure (39%).

\( \Phi BKs \) do not live in a vacuum, and the views reported here may well reflect the impressions of many more other academically successful seniors. Certainly these unfavorable impressions do not make Federal recruitment any easier.

In the tight labor market of the late 1990s, with many employers aggressively courting students as promising as \( \Phi BKs \), these are not minor obstacles. Even many
Stalwarts may lose heart when faced with a choice between what they may see as tangible, imminent job prospects in the private sector versus the relatively unknown but presumed lengthy, arduous task of trying to secure a good Federal job.

A recent graduate told one GWU focus group:

“Some companies are in such desperate need of people [that] I was offered a job almost before I went in to interview...But there are government jobs that I applied for where they said they couldn’t even get back to me for six months.”

Summary

Federal jobs do not evoke favorable impressions among many Phi Beta Kappas. Most ΦΒΚs do envision attractive benefits and job security, but not much else that is positive. Only a minority of ΦΒΚs believe such jobs offer “opportunities to make the world better” (one-third) or that starting salaries are attractive (one-fifth). Few (one-twentieth) believe Federal workers have much flexibility in how they do their jobs.

Nevertheless, one out of every eight ΦΒΚs (13%) is decidedly attracted to working for the Federal government. Those who are most attracted are particularly likely to want careers that let them “have a real impact on national issues” and believe Federal jobs will enable them to do that. Those who value and are optimistic about Federal starting salaries and advancement opportunities are also more likely than other ΦΒΚs to want Federal careers.

Along with these attitudinal dynamics, ΦΒΚs are more likely to aspire to Federal jobs if they major in political science or a closely related field and if they have friends and relatives who work for the Federal government.

If the Federal government can successfully sign up the 13% of ΦΒΚs who are quite attracted to such careers, it will actually be getting more than its proportionate share of ΦΒΚs, because Federal civilian jobs constitute only about 2% of the total U.S. workforce. Yet, converting ΦΒΚ interest into actual workers confronts at least two serious obstacles. Large numbers of interested ΦΒΚs still say they have no idea how to go about applying for a Federal job and that they suppose it is probably a long and burdensome process.

References


Endnotes

1. These focus groups did not uncover any unexpected motivating factors, but they did help refine the language used to describe each factor in the questionnaire. They also contributed to sorting some broad concepts into more precise ones. For example, “good salary” was divided into “attractive starting salary” and “attractive salary increases over time.” Also, participants saw “altruism/public service” as having three different thrusts – “chances to help other people directly” (personal, hands-on altruism), “opportunities to make the world better” (a macro-orientation with a wider scope) and “have a real impact on national issues” (an efficacy and policy orientation).

2. The large majority of those surveyed were seniors, but recipients also included a few second-semester juniors and some who may have just graduated. For convenience, references in the text generalize to the respondent pool as “seniors.”

3. See Appendix A for the exact wording of each of the 21 factors.

4. To avoid cluttering the model with variables that added little to its explanatory power, .001 was used as the significance threshold for the stepwise entry into the regression equation.

5. Neither this congruence measure nor other parts of the survey directly addressed one perspective regarding “career advancement” which was voiced by a few of the focus group participants: “…first develop expertise in government then go to [a business job to] sell that skill.”

6. ΦBKs are hardly alone in thinking that the process is cumbersome. Levine and Kleeman (1986, p. 226) concur that the Federal government “has created confusing and frustrating processes for entry into the civil service.”

7. Paul Light (1995) sees an even more complex situation developing: “Ultimately, thickening of government may mean that strategies to enhance entry-level recruitment can no longer coexist with strategies to encourage employee retention.

Recruitment and retention have been linked for so long that thinking of the two as potential adversaries may be quite difficult indeed.” (p. 72)

Appendix A: Item Wording

Attractive starting salary
Attractive salary increases over time
Attractive medical/retirement/other benefits
Capable co-workers
Challenging work
Chances to help other people directly
Congenial social relations at the office
Diversity in the workplace
Efficient procedures for conducting work
Freedom to do your job your own way
Have a real impact on national issues
Job respected by your family and peers
Job security (low risk of losing job)
Merit-based rewards and recognition
Modern, high-tech equipment/facilities
Mostly low-pressure work days
Opportunities for career advancement
Opportunities to make the world better
Personal growth and new skills
Strong relations with co-workers outside the office
Supportive family leave policies