

Looking for the Future Leaders of Government? Don't Count on Presidential Management Interns

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Over a quarter century ago, President Carter established the Presidential Management Intern program “to attract to federal service men and women of exceptional management potential” (Executive Order 12008). Under President Reagan, the emphasis of the program was tweaked to attracting those “who have a clear interest in, and commitment to, a career in the analysis and management of public policies and programs” (Executive Order 12364).

Key to both the original and updated objectives of the program is this potential for, interest in, and commitment to management. The program recruits candidates directly from graduate programs. Neither management experience nor demonstrated skill are eligibility criteria. The logical goal of recruiting people with promise and dedication is to develop their raw potential so in the future they can successfully assume leadership roles in government.

At no time in the last quarter century has this goal been more critical than now. Human capital management was designated a high-risk area by the General Accounting Office (GAO) in 2001. Two years later, the GAO noted progress but argued that “it remains clear that today’s federal human capital strategies are not appropriately constituted to meet current and emerging challenges or to drive the needed transformation across the federal government” (GAO, January 2003). The GAO report emphasized continued challenges in leadership, human capital planning, and acquiring, developing

and retaining talent. The coming retirement boom will leave government further weakened, unless effective succession strategies are in place.

Recent data on the Presidential Management Intern (PMI) program highlight the strengths and shortcomings of the program as a tool for redressing the government's human capital crisis. These data come from three Brookings Institution Center for Public Service (CPS) studies of the 2001-2003 cohort of PMIs. Other evidence comes from earlier work: 2001 and 2002 CPS studies of former PMIs who remained in federal service, and a 2001 study by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB).

Clear from this research is that government can recruit outstanding public servants. Studies define the PMI program as a strong recruitment tool – benefiting agencies looking for high-performers and students with a commitment to public service. However, persistent problems with the program limit its ability to be an effective tool in the government's long-range human capital management. Many PMIs simply do not stay in government long enough to assume leadership roles and few that stay are promoted to supervisory positions.

Data on the program suggests three reasons why the PMI program may fall short of its objective:

- (1) The program lacks an emphasis on management and skill development for the future.
- (2) Working for the federal government is perceived as having fewer rewards and more frustrations than these driven, high-performers expected, sending them in search of opportunities in other sectors.

(3) Recruiting highly talented graduate students, providing two years of training, hoping that they turn out to be good managers, and assuming that they will stay long enough to manage may simply be an unrealistic strategy.

To redress the first problem, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) would need to bolster the management and other skill development aspects of the PMIs' experience and work with supervisors to ensure that they have a shared vision of the program as a management development tool. These strategies are advocated by MSPB in their 2001 report on the program. In addition, OPM would need to work closely with agencies to ensure that PMI placements are a good match for driven recruits seeking to build their skills.

Solving the second problem – the frustrations associated with federal work – would require broader federal reform like that recommended by the National Commission on the Public Service earlier this year. The Commission's recommendations include reorganizing the government into mission-related executive departments and abolishing the General Schedule system.

However, even with these changes, it may simply be unrealistic to assume that graduate students make decisions about the next ten or more years when they accept a PMI placement. Simply put, the assumptions underlying the program – that, with two years of training, graduate students with potential will become the senior managers of the future – run counter to current public service career paths. The PMI program may be an inherently flawed strategy to address long-range human capital needs because today's public servants choose to change jobs and sectors.

The Presidential Management Intern Program

Presidential Management Interns are “outstanding men and women from a variety of academic disciplines” with graduate training related to the analysis and management of public programs (Executive Order 12364). They have been vetted through a competitive nomination, selection, and placement process by their graduate school, OPM, and the federal agency supervising their work. Last year there were 750 PMIs serving in the federal government, roughly half in their first year of the program and half in their second year.

The prestigious two-year training program starts interns at the General Schedule (GS) 9 level (a salary of \$34,451 to \$44,783 per year), offering the potential to reach the GS 11 level after one year of service (a salary of \$41,684 to \$54,185 per year). After the internship period, PMIs may be converted to career employees by their agency. At the end of their internships, PMIs are eligible for GS 12 level positions (a salary of \$49,959 to \$64,944 per year).

Unlike their colleagues starting as GS 9 level employees, but outside of the program, PMIs are supposed to be provided with at least 80 hours a year of specialized training, covering leadership, management, communication, teamwork, and career development. Other professional growth opportunities for PMIs include participation in career development groups and a rotation assignment. Rotations allow PMIs to gain experience in a different branch, agency, or office than their main assignment.

Studies of the 2001-2003 Cohort

When the Presidential Management Intern class of 2001-2003 began their two-year program, the Brookings Institution's Center for Public Service commissioned Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) to conduct telephone interviews with PMIs from this cohort at the start, mid-point, and near the end of their program.

The sample for the interviews was drawn from the list of intern names matched with agency assignments available on the program's website (www.pmi.opm.gov). Several approaches were used to collect home phone numbers for the sample. Some federal agencies post employees' work phone numbers and e-mail addresses on their websites. When such information was available, the interns were contacted by phone or by e-mail at work. During that contact, they were briefly asked whether they would be willing to provide their home phone numbers and be contacted for the survey. When detailed contact information was not available, PSRA would call the agency and ask to speak to the intern. PSRA would then ask interns if they would be willing to share their home phone number for a later interview. PSRA used online telephone directories when unable to locate interns through their agencies.

All the interns for whom a correct home telephone number was identified were contacted for the survey. Correct contact information was available for 62 percent of the original list of 386 interns. Of the 240 for whom PSRA was able to identify home phone numbers, 175 (73 percent) were willing and available to be interviewed for the study. Interviewing for the first phase of the study was conducted from September 24, 2001 through January 2, 2002.

Between phase one and later phases in the study, many interns were no longer at their original home number. Since many were on rotations in different agencies, PSRA no longer had their work numbers or e-mail addresses, nor did they have information to help identify which agency directories to search for this new information. Some interns may have left the program and moved. While some interns may have left for personal reasons, others may have been the least satisfied with their internship. The study results do not represent interns who leave the program early.

From April 18, 2002 to May 20, 2002, PSRA attempted to contact all of the 175 PMIs who responded to the first phase of the study. They were able to reach and secure interviews with 146 interns (83 percent). Finally, the following spring (April 3 to May 29, 2003), PSRA attempted to reach the 146 interns who participated in both phase one and phase two of the study. At this point, PSRA was able to reach 95 interns (65 percent) from the phase two sample. These 95 interns are about a quarter of the entire 2001-2003 cohort. All but one of the interns, reached in phase three and willing to be interviewed a third time, were still in the PMI program.

The margin of error is plus or minus 10 percentage points for results based on the sample of 95 interns.

Profile of the sample

When first interviewed in 2001, 85 percent of the entering PMIs most recently completed their master's degree, while the others had just received a law degree (9 percent) or a doctorate (6 percent). Most (78 percent) had been in place as a PMI for less

than four months. None had been with the federal government for more than nine months. Forty percent of the PMIs had just finished a public administration, public affairs, or public policy program before beginning their federal service.

Of the 175 PMIs originally included in the study, roughly 70 percent were female and 30 percent were male. Seventy-six percent were white. Most of the PMIs (78 percent) were under 30 years old. Seventy percent identified themselves as Democrats or leaning Democratic and 15 percent identified themselves as Republican or leaning Republican. The demographics of the sample were consistent throughout all phases of the study. No demographic characteristic could be linked to a greater or lesser tendency to respond to the second phase or third phase of the study.

In 2001, 20 percent of the PMIs felt they could trust the federal government in Washington just about always. That figure dipped significantly to 6 percent mid-way through their internships but reached 10 percent in 2003. A 2001 high and 2002 low point with the 2003 figure somewhere in between was evident, but to a lesser degree, when the PMIs were asked about trust in federal employees. All of the 2001 interviews took place after September 11 when there was a national surge of support for the federal government. PMIs may have entered government with great trust that lowered with experience or the 2001 data may have been inflated in the aftermath of September 11. Compared to a national sample of Americans, PMIs were roughly equally likely to trust government just about always in the late fall of 2001 and spring of 2002.¹

Despite the fluctuations in levels of trust over time, tenure with the federal government did not change PMIs' opinions on whether federal programs should be cut or maintained. Not surprisingly, since their jobs depended upon a strong federal

government, the PMIs were less likely to believe that federal programs should be cut, compared to the national sample of Americans.

In 2002 and 2003, the interns were asked whether wrong priorities or programmatic inefficiencies were a bigger problem in government. Statistically, there were no real differences in their responses between the years. In 2002, 67 percent identified inefficiencies as the bigger problem and, in 2003, 56 percent still felt this way. In 2002, 12 percent argued that the bigger problem with government was its priorities and in 2003, 17 percent agreed. Surveyed in 2002, Americans were more likely than the PMIs to think the bigger problem was that government has the wrong priorities (29 percent versus 12 percent).

Recruitment to Federal Service

As the Second National Commission on the Public Service reported in January 2003, “recruitment to federal jobs is heavily burdened by ancient and illogical procedures that vastly complicate the application process...the very nature of the application deters applicants.” Due to the hurdles associated with applying for a government job, Newcomer, Johnson, Naccarato, and Collie argued that the “PMI program presents, without question, the easiest way for...students to get a job with the federal government – as long as the students pass through the elaborate, yet clear, screening process.”

Evidence from the 2001-2003 cohort of PMIs suggested that the program is an outstanding recruiting tool. When asked whether anything played an important role in their job decision, after having been asked about general reasons for choosing a job, 32

¹ See Mackenzie and Labiner for data from national studies on Americans’ views of government.

percent mentioned the PMI program by name. The reputation of the program appears to be a stronger draw than public service more generally. Just 7 percent offered public service as the reason they chose their job.

Most of the interns (81 percent) did give serious consideration to jobs outside the federal government too. Of these, about a third explored the private sector and another third explored the nonprofit sector. Few considered state or local government. When choosing among opportunities, 35 percent of the PMIs named the program specifically as the reason they decided to work for the federal government rather than in another sector. The strength of the program as a recruiting tool is reinforced by a 2001 MSPB study. Sixty-two percent of the PMIs surveyed for that study said they would not have entered federal service without the PMI program.

Perhaps because a PMI is so attractive to candidates, the program draws highly motivated and competent public servants. When asked about the factors associated with their decision to work for the federal government, almost all of the interns (79 percent) listed the opportunity to do challenging work as a very important consideration. Personal and professional growth, the nature of their work, and the opportunity to impact national issues also topped the list of very important considerations in the decision to serve in the federal government. Job security (very important to 42 percent), benefits (very important to 37 percent) and salary (very important to just 13 percent) fell at the bottom of the list of motivators for the 2001-2003 PMIs.

A high level of commitment to public service was seen among PMIs who stayed in government after their internships were complete. Former PMIs have a stronger dedication to public service than their colleagues in government. This evidence comes

from a broader 2001 Center for Public Service survey of 1,051 federal employees, 107 of whom began their careers in the PMI program.² The study asked federal workers why they come to work each day. Answering this question, those who participated in the PMI program cited their interest in impacting the public good much more often than the samples of the Senior Executive Service, GS managers, or other GS employees.

Research by the MSPB further supports the argument that the PMI program effectively recruits talented people to the federal service. Their research indicates that the overwhelming majority of the interns' supervisors thought the PMI program offered better employees than other hiring methods. Almost nine-in-ten thought their PMIs exceeded job requirements. Perhaps most telling, more than four-in-five agency coordinators and supervisors felt the extra cost to their agencies, \$4,800 per intern in 2001, was worth the quality of candidates the program offered.

² Telephone interviews were conducted with federal employees at their homes between February 7 and June 1, 2001. In addition to the 107 PMIs, the sample included 177 Senior Executive Service members, 213 General Schedule managers and supervisors, and 554 General Schedule employees. Most of the PMIs came from the entering classes of 1997, 1998, and 1999. Those in the 1999 class were just completing their internships. The margin of error on these data for the PMI sub-sample is plus or minus 9 percentage points.

Developing the Next Generation of Federal Leaders

The mission of the PMI program, however, is founded on development and retention, rather than simply recruitment, even of bright, mission-oriented people. The emphasis on the long-term objective of the program is made clear by OPM Director Kay Coles James in her remarks on the PMI website homepage. Coles James emphasizes the future, rather than the present, and careers, rather than jobs:

This is an extraordinary time in the history of our great Nation, a time in which challenges and opportunities abound for those having the skills and talents required to lead the Government of the future. Many of our future leaders will come from the Federal Government's elite Presidential Management Intern Program. If you have an interest in a career in the analysis and management of public policy programs, if you are academically prepared, and if you are highly motivated and seek opportunities for innovation, President George W. Bush and the United States Government are interested in you.

Despite this focus on the future, the 2001 report from MSPB suggests that the PMI program does not achieve its long-term objectives that effectively. The study concluded that participation in the program did not increase retention. Over time, PMIs leave government at similar rates to their colleagues who did not begin their careers in this supportive, development-oriented program. MSPB data from the 1994-1996 class indicate that 35 percent left within a year of completing their internships or sooner and

over half were gone five years after starting their federal service – hardly long enough to apply any management training.

One could assume that people who complete relevant graduate work and apply for this selective program are more committed to a federal service career than their colleagues. Other CPS data, described earlier, suggests that PMIs are certainly more mission-driven. One might also assume that the specialized training and development associated with the PMI program would bolster retention. The fact that PMI retention rates are no better than those of their colleagues suggests a problem for a program with a focus on future leaders.

In addition, it is not surprising, based on positive supervisor and agency feedback, that PMIs were more likely to advance to the managerial ranks than their colleagues. However, the MSPB study found that only a small percent of PMIs supervise within four to five years of being hired. Only between 3 and 8 percent of PMIs entering federal service from 1988 through 1994 were supervisors four to five years into their tenure. After ten years of service, fewer than one in five entering government in 1990 were in a supervisory role. Again, it is troubling that so few who stay in federal service end up in line to be the next generation of federal leaders.

Falling Short of Its Objectives

The recent studies of the PMI program suggest three reasons why it may not be filling the pipeline for government's future leaders: (1) a lack of focus on management and skill development, (2) the nature of federal work, and (3) recent graduates' interest in a more varied career path.

Lack of emphasis on management and skill development

PMIs chose the program for opportunities for growth and professional development and were very disappointed. Interviewed at the beginning of their internships, the 2001-2003 PMIs said the opportunity for personal growth and skill development was a very important consideration in the decision to work for the federal government. Concerns about this development top the list of major work-related reasons why the PMIs may leave within five years. When asked about their satisfaction with their opportunity to develop new skills, just over half were satisfied in 2001 and 2002. This figure dropped significantly, to 35 percent, by 2003. That year, significantly more interns (20 percent) were not too satisfied with these opportunities. Earlier in their internships, under 10 percent expressed this strong level of dissatisfaction. After two years of service, many of the PMIs seemed to feel they had hit a wall in their professional development.

Newcomer et al. developed a list of expectations PMIs held for a 1987 study of program alumni. The Center for Public Service asked the 2001-2003 cohort about these same expectations to gauge changes and consistencies 15 years later. Interestingly, in 1987, as in 2003, receiving management development training was third to the bottom in the ranking of how well the interns' jobs met their expectations. Using management skills was at the bottom of the list in 1987 and next to the bottom in 2003. Considering the training component of the program, it was particularly surprising that there was such a dramatic and persistent shortfall between the interns' expectations for management

training and their sense that this expectation was fulfilled. With realities about management development falling so short of expectations in both 1987 and 2003, problems with the PMI program appear intractable.

When they started their internships, 62 percent of the 2001-2003 PMIs sampled had a high expectation that they would receive management training; this dropped significantly to 47 percent by 2003. This decline may be because the interns received the training they expected early in their internships or because they had lowered their expectations based on their experiences. Regardless, only 23 percent of the interns felt that their job totally fulfilled this expectation. Another 67 percent believed their internships fulfilled their expectation only somewhat. Of the list of expectations, receiving management development training ranked highest in the “not fulfilled at all” category. For 11 percent, the expectation for management development training was completely unrealized.

The 2001 MSBP study of the PMI program noted problems with intern training as well. Albeit a minority, many of the interns studied did not receive the 80 hours of training they were promised. Many did not have their required rotation outside their home office. The MSPB study also found that PMI supervisors did not perceive the program to be a means to develop future leaders. Rather, many supervisors believed the program was a way to attract talented graduate students, regardless of their long-term potential in the federal service. Based on their work, MSPB recommended that “OPM should direct agencies’ and its own focus towards the stated purpose of the PMI program so that all parties understand its special objectives of identifying future managers and

providing them with developmental opportunities” and that “OPM should work with agencies to improve PMI training.”

The nature of federal work

Based on the way PMIs describe their frustrations with government, it is no surprise that retention rates are not better. Simply put, these driven high-performers were looking for more opportunities to make a difference and greater challenges than they perceived federal service offered them.

For 65 percent of the entering PMIs, the opportunity to impact national issues was a very important consideration in their decision to work for the federal government. This was somewhat important to another 30 percent. Towards the end of their internships, PMIs did not feel that they were making a difference. Too few opportunities to do something worthwhile was cited by 40 percent as a major reason to exit the federal government by those planning to leave within five years. In both 2002 and 2003, the PMIs were asked how satisfied they were with their opportunity to accomplish something worthwhile. Between 40 percent (2002) and 34 percent (2003) were very satisfied with their opportunity to accomplish something worthwhile at work. Between 41 percent (2002) and 45 percent (2003) were somewhat satisfied with this opportunity. Others were either not too satisfied or not satisfied at all on this front. While these satisfaction figures may appear high, it is important to remember that the PMIs are more driven to make a difference than other workers.

Driven PMIs were also underwhelmed by the challenges presented to them in their jobs. Too few opportunities to do challenging work was among the top three work-related reasons for exiting federal service within the next five years. A significant minority, 29 percent, had less work than they could handle. Few thought their work was very difficult (9 percent in 2003 and 4 percent in 2002). Both years, about just over 60 percent found their work somewhat difficult, about a quarter found their work not too difficult, and about one-in-twenty found their work not difficult at all.

From the data, however, it is hard to pinpoint the source of this sense of having a job that was not too demanding. The PMIs did not describe their time as consumed by routine office work. To the contrary, many said they spent a great deal of their day working on projects or programs related to their organization's mission (79 percent) and working independently on projects (69 percent). Just 5 percent said that they spent a great deal of their time doing basic office work or routine tasks. During the course of their internships, many assumed increased responsibilities. At the end of their internships, compared to the beginning, the PMIs were significantly more likely to spend a great deal of their day working independently, and compared to the mid-point, more likely to spend time working on projects related to their organization's mission.

Still, it appears that many PMIs are looking for challenges not matched by their jobs. Some placements may simply be a poor fit for exceedingly driven recruits.

Alternatively, the interns may be expecting an intensity that most jobs would not match.

Other frustrations with their internships relate to broader federal workplace issues.

Comparing the interns to a larger CPS study of 673 federal workers conducted in the

spring of 2002, the PMIs were more likely to feel under-resourced.³ In the spring of 2002, 34 percent of the federal workers felt their organization always had access to the information or technological equipment needed to do its job well; just roughly 20 percent of PMIs agreed.

At the start of their service, the 2001-2003 PMIs were asked about the morale of their co-workers. Under a quarter ranked morale as very high. Half ranked morale as somewhat high. Morale may be low due to retention issues. Half of the former PMIs, studied by CPS in 2001, thought government did a bad job retaining talented employees and four-in-five thought government did a bad job disciplining poor performers. The former interns were also least likely in government to be very satisfied with their salaries or jobs overall.

To retain the PMIs who are frustrated by the federal workplace would require the type of major reforms to the government proposed by the National Commission on the Public Service earlier this year. Augmenting the management aspects of the PMI program or any other program enhancements can never make up for the overarching frustrations that these dedicated high-performers have with federal service.

Recent graduates' interest in a varied career path

Even if weaknesses in the PMI program were redressed and if Congress enacted the type of reforms suggested by the National Commission on the Public Service, it may simply be unrealistic to think that talented graduate students would be bound to a long

³ Telephone interviews were conducted with 673 federal employees at their homes between April 1 and May 7, 2002. This sample was a subset of the Center for Public Service's 2001 study of 1,051 federal

federal career when they accept an internship. First, many interns participate in the program with the intention of moving from government at the end of their two-year stint. Even those with the most committed intentions may find themselves, like their peers in public service, prone to switching from sector to sector, rather than spending a long career in government.

One of the most notable reasons PMIs leave government is that some never had any intention of staying in the federal government after their internships were complete. Considering the nature of the program as a long-term investment in federal leadership, these data identify a troubling problem with the screening process.

Even as they started their internships in 2001, 17 percent of the 2001-2003 interns planned to leave government either before or at the end of their two-year stint. Over half (53 percent) planned to work for government for five years or fewer. Just 19 percent planned to stay in government more than ten years. Over time, fewer planned a long-term career in government. After spending time in the federal service, just 11 percent planned to stay more than ten years. Furthermore, when asked more broadly about how long a person should stay in government in the course of a public service career, the PMIs were more likely to advocate a shorter stint in 2003 than in 2002.

Interviewed again as the PMIs entered the last few months of their internships, 6 percent of those remaining in the program were ready to leave at the end of their two years of service. There are several possible reasons why, compared to the first phase of the study, fewer may have had the intent to leave the federal service at the end of their internships. The PMIs may have grown more attached to government. Alternatively, the current state of the job market may have pushed even dissatisfied PMIs into staying in the

employees. The margin of error on these data is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

federal service. When they were first asked about their intent to leave, the unemployment rate was lower than its recent nine-year high.

Paul C. Light's analysis in *The New Public Service* explains why the PMI program may always have a tough time realizing its goals – even if the screening process were improved, if management were re-emphasized, and if government underwent extensive reforms. Based on Light's work, hand-picking motivated graduate students, providing management training, and assuming that these strong recruits will stay in government long enough to fill the leadership pipeline may be an unrealistic strategy. *The New Public Service* is based on a survey of 1973 to 1993 graduates of top public policy and administration programs. Drawing on the survey results, Light finds this “new public service” committed to public service work, yet less interested in government, and more prone to switching sectors, from public to nonprofit and private. With the “new public service” expressing a greater interest in changing jobs and sectors, rather than a long career in federal service, the framework for the PMI program seems anachronistic.

Conclusion

There is good news and bad news in the recent data on PMIs. The federal government can recruit motivated and talented people, but many of these high-performers will leave the federal service soon after they arrive.

If leaving is simply a function of current standards for changing jobs and sectors, the PMI program will never be that effective as a tool for long-range human capital planning. However, the framework of the program may have merits, under a name that does not include “management,” as a vehicle to expose well-trained, committed recent

graduates to public service. The program is an excellent tool for helping recent graduates, with great academic training and perhaps little experience, bypass the complex federal hiring process and serve the federal government, whether for two years or for their entire career. Rather than a management internship, it could simply be a competitive federal program for recent master's, law, and doctoral students. Removing the seemingly unrealized management focus, the program could expand to students interested in technical or other non-managerial work. Maintaining and enhancing the professional development aspects seems critical to ensuring that the program remains sought-after by the strongest candidates.

Because, as the National Commission on the Public Service argued, the federal service is “one of the most difficult professions in America to enter” and because agency coordinators and supervisors agree that PMIs are often better performers than those selected through other mechanisms, maintaining a special program for recent graduates seems a worthwhile goal for government, despite the program costs. However, the fact that higher-performers enter federal service through the PMI program begs the question whether the critical draw of the program for this selective group is the professional development aspect or the relative ease of entry into the federal system. The data show that for 81 percent of the PMIs, opportunities for growth and skill development were very important. For this reason, folding the PMI program into the Federal Career Intern program, which lacks an emphasis on the development of management skills, could reduce the caliber of applicants. However, if the ease of entry into federal service is also a strong selling point to the interns, streamlining the federal hiring process could help

ensure that the best qualified candidates always receive offers for the federal service, not just through the PMI program.

Streamlining hiring might also redress the core leadership problem that the PMI program in its current or even improved form cannot. The complex federal hiring process is leaving government short on managerial talent with a great number of retirements on the horizon. The solution does not seem to be in trying to commit the “new public service” to a long career limited to the federal government. Rather, the government should streamline the hiring of mid- and senior-level managers from the private sector, nonprofits, and other levels of government or, if necessary, introduce specialized programs to facilitate the hiring of experienced leaders working outside of the federal service.

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