

# IN SEARCH OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Paul C. Light

CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE  
THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WAGNER SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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## INTRODUCTION

America's college graduates could not have entered the job market at a more difficult moment in economic time. Unemployment is up, hiring is down, the economy is sluggish, and pink slips are back in fashion.

The market is particularly bleak for the college seniors who might be most likely to want a career in public service, those with majors in the humanities, social sciences, social work, and education. Charitable contributions are flat, foundation assets are down, many nonprofit agencies are cutting back, state and local governments are cutting back, and the federal government remains a mystery for eager applicants.

Despite this cold market, college seniors have not changed their standards. They still put an emphasis on finding jobs that provide the opportunity to help people, learn new skills, and do challenging work. According to a random sample of 1,002 about-to-graduate liberal arts and social work students interviewed this April by Princeton Survey Research Associates on behalf of the Center for Public Service, the nature of the job, not the size of the paycheck, is still the most important consideration in making a decision about where to work.<sup>1</sup>

More broadly, the survey provides strong support for those who believe that government must take bold action to address its reputation as an employer. Just as the bipartisan National Commission on the Public Service chaired by former Federal Reserve Board Chairman, Paul A. Volcker warned earlier this year, too many seniors see

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted from March 24, 2003 to April 30, 2003. For results based on the full sample, the margin of error is + or – three percent. This means that one can have 95% confidence that the results in the survey would only vary by three percent on either side of the stated figure.

government as the most difficult sector to enter, and its hiring process as by far the slowest and most confusing. Even seniors who would prefer a government job do not know how to get one.

More troubling, seniors do not see government as the best place to go for helping people. When they hear the words “public service,” they think of the kind of work they see in the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits, not government or its contractors, are also seen as the best at spending money wisely, being fair in their decisions, and delivering services on the public’s behalf. Contrary to those who say that government must become more businesslike to compete, these seniors almost surely would recommend that government become more nonprofit-like, especially in reassuring potential recruits that they will be given a chance to help people.

## OVERVIEW

This emphatic interest in helping people suggests an extraordinary opportunity for public-service organizations to make their case to a motivated workforce: 26 percent of the seniors said they had given very serious consideration to any kind of public-service job, be it working for government, a nonprofit, or a contractor, while another 36 percent had given it somewhat serious consideration.

Although the Center does not have the data to establish a trend line to the past—meaning that this year’s number could be up or down from past years—it is hard to imagine how the numbers could be much higher. The question is whether public-service organizations have the agility, let alone the funding, to take advantage of the opportunity. After all, the job market is cold in large part because organizations in all three sectors do not have the money for hiring.

For those who are particularly concerned about increasing government’s success in the war for talent, this report supports the need for quick action to streamline the hiring process and bolster its reputation as a place where young Americans can make a difference in serving the country. The faster it moves to send a dramatic signal that it is ready to provide the kind of work young Americans clearly want, the faster it can begin strengthening its workforce for the future.

This is only one of several significant findings bearing on the future of the public service in the Center’s survey of 1,002 college seniors pursuing the humanities, social sciences, social work, and education.

### *Destinations*

- Two-thirds of the seniors said they intended to go directly to work after graduation, while a third expected to go onto graduate school. Of those who intended to go to work, only a quarter actually had a job lined up.

### *Public Service Preferences*

- Twenty percent of all seniors said they had given very serious consideration to a job in a nonprofit organization, 18 percent said the same about working for the federal government, 19 percent about state and local government, and 13 percent about a business that works for government under a contract or grant.
- Among the 615 seniors who said they had given very or somewhat serious consideration to any kind of public-service job, 42 percent said they would prefer to work for the nonprofit sector, 37 percent for government (federal, state, or local), and 19 percent for a contractor.

### *Views of the Sectors*

- The nonprofit sector was seen as the best place to go for someone who wanted a chance to help people, make a difference, and gain the respect of family and friends; government was seen as most attractive for someone who wanted good benefits and the chance to serve the country, and contractors for someone who wanted the best salary.

- The nonprofit sector was seen as the best of the three sectors at spending money wisely, helping people, and being fair in its decisions: 60 percent said the nonprofit sector was the best at spending money wisely, compared to just 6 percent who said government; 61 percent said the nonprofit sector was the best at being fair in its decisions, compared to just 22 percent who said government; and 76 percent said the nonprofit sector was the best at helping people, compared to just 16 who said government. Contractors were viewed as the worst at being fair in their decisions (10 percent) and helping people (4 percent), but ranked above government on spending money wisely (29 percent).

#### *Finding a Job in Public Service*

- These seniors were generally confused about how to find work with government, nonprofits, or contractors. Just 44 percent said they knew a great deal or fair amount about finding a job in either government or a nonprofit, and even fewer, 30 percent, said they knew a great deal or fair amount about finding work for a contractor.
- Nevertheless, 62 percent said finding a job in a nonprofit organization would not be difficult or not difficult at all, compared to 34 percent who said the same about finding a job with a contractor, and just 28 percent who said the same about a job in government.
- Seniors described the government hiring process as confusing (63 percent), slow (78 percent), and fair (77 percent); the nonprofit hiring process as simple

(69 percent), fast (56 percent), and fair (89 percent); and the contractor hiring process in between the two on simplicity and speed.

### *Definitions of Service*

- Seniors defined public service almost entirely in terms of helping people. Asked what the words “public service” meant to them, 36 percent said helping people, 30 percent said helping the community, nation, or society, and 15 percent said doing something selfless. Only five percent defined public service as working for government or the military, and just two percent said working for a nonprofit.
- Asked to rate a series of specific activities as a form of public service, 82 percent said volunteering was completely public service, 58 percent said the same about voting, 48 percent said the same about giving money to charity, while just five percent said contributing money to a political campaign was completely public service.
- Asked about jobs as a form of public service, 58 percent said working for a nonprofit organization was completely public service, 28 percent said the same about working for government, and 23 percent about working for a contractor.

*The Impact of Volunteering, Interning, and Working on Job Preferences*

- Only 8 percent of these seniors said they had volunteered, interned, or worked for the federal government in the past, compared to 10 percent for contractors, 11 percent for state or local government, and 54 percent for nonprofits.
- Seniors who had volunteered, interned, or worked in any of the three sectors in the past were much more interested in taking a public service job than those who had not.
- 85 percent of seniors who had volunteered, interned, or worked in government said they had very or somewhat seriously considered a public service job, compared to 68 percent of seniors who had these experiences with the nonprofit sector, and 66 percent who had these experiences with contractors. The more contact students have with any of the sectors, the better they feel about a public service career.

The rest of this report will explore these patterns in more detail, starting with a discussion of how these students define public service. As we shall see, when students hear the words “public service,” they are most likely to think about the kind of work they see in the nonprofit sector, not in government or with contractors. Somewhere along the line, government lost its meaning as a destination for those who want to help people and make a difference. Bluntly put, when students think “public service,” they think nonprofit.



Seniors who want to make a difference see the nonprofit sector as the place to be, albeit at a cost in salary, benefits, and job security. Only two percent of the seniors said that the nonprofit sector was the best of the three sectors for salaries, and just five percent said it was the best for benefits. Even more troubling for the nonprofit sector, only 22 percent of the seniors said nonprofits were the place to go for serving the country. Just as government has lost its meaning as a destination for helping people, the nonprofit sector has little identity as a place to serve the country. Even among students who say they would prefer a nonprofit job, government gets the nod as the destination for national service.

#### DEFINITIONS OF PUBLIC SERVICE

The Class of '03 does not have a “one-size-fits-all” vision of *where* public service occurs, but shares a very similar definition of what the term means. When asked what the term means to them, the college seniors gave three broad definitions:

- 36 percent focused on *who* gets served such “doing things for the public,” “helping everyone in the community,” “helping the less fortunate,” “the betterment of mankind,” or “helping people.”
- 30 percent focused on *what* gets served such as “giving back to your community,” “working for the citizens of the U.S.A.,” “working for the good of society,” “doing things that help the community,” or “being a contributing member of society.”

- 15 percent focused on *how* service is rewarded such as “doing things for the community and not expecting to get anything back except that warm feeling,” and “doing your part.”
- Five percent defined the term as working for government
- Two percent, equated the term with working for a nonprofit agency
- None mentioned running for office or other forms of political work.

When seniors hear the words “public service,” they think about the kind of one-to-one work that is traditionally viewed as part of civil society, not government and politics.

When asked to rate a set of specific activities on the degree to which they could be defined as public service, it is hardly surprising that the seniors would see a difference between two very different levels of public service:

- On the least intensive end of the definition, 58 percent of the seniors said voting was completely a form of public service, and 48 percent said the same of contributing money to a charity.
- On the more intensive end, 82 percent said volunteering was completely a form of public service, 58 percent said the same about working for a nonprofit, 28 percent about working for government, and 23 percent about working for a business that provides goods or services to government under a contract.

The only places where public service cannot be found are in contributing money to a political candidate or party (only 5 percent said this was completely public service), and working for a business in general (only 7 percent said this was completely public service).

Liberals and Democrats were more likely to rate the more intensive activities as completely public service than conservatives and Republicans. In turn, conservatives and Republicans were more likely to rate the low-impact activities as completely public service than liberals and Democrats. For one example, 54 percent of conservative seniors said contributing money to a charity was completely public service, compared to 46 percent of liberals. For another, 60 percent of liberal seniors said working for a nonprofit was completely public service, compared to 50 percent of conservatives.

The lower rating for government work does not reside in demographics—men and women, younger students and older, those with large amounts of debt and none at all, agree that working for a nonprofit is more a form of public service than is government. Nor does it reside in politics—27 percent of Democrats and 32 percent of Republicans say working for government is completely a form of public service, compared to 25 percent of liberals and 31 percent of conservatives. Rather, it appears to reside in a persistent view of government as unable to provide the kind of mission-driven jobs that allow employees to feel that they are helping people every day.

## RATING THE SECTORS

This conclusion is clearly echoed in head-to-head ratings of the sectors on three aspects of performance: (1) helping people, (2) spending money wisely, and (3) being fair in decisions. Asked which sector does a better job on each, the nonprofit sector came out ahead on all three measures, even among seniors who said that they would prefer a job with government or a contractor. As Table 1 shows, for example, 55 percent of seniors

who preferred a public service job in government said the nonprofit sector was the best at spending money wisely.

TABLE 1

% Who said **nonprofit sector** was best at each role

Role	Preferred public service job		
	Government	Nonprofit	Contractor
Spending money wisely	55%	71%	58%
Being fair in its decisions	48	74	63
Helping people	66	85	77

N=1,002

Government fares better when seniors are asked which sector is best at delivering services on the public’s behalf: 44 percent said nonprofits, 36 percent said government, and just 16 percent said contractors. Even here, however, government and nonprofits run close among students who said they would prefer a public service job in government: 44 percent said they had the most confidence in government, and 39 percent said nonprofit.

If government and contractors are not seen as the best places to go on these key measures of performance, why do so many seniors still prefer jobs with them? (Recall from the earlier overview, given a choice among public service jobs, 37 percent of the seniors said they would prefer to work for government, while 19 percent said contractors.)

Here, basic realities do make a difference.

For example, most seniors were convinced that contractors would pay better salaries than either government or nonprofits. Asked which sector would offer better salaries, only 2 percent answered the nonprofit sector, compared to 37 percent who said

government, and 59 percent who said contractors. Even students who preferred a public service job in the other two sectors recognized the cost of doing so: 59 percent of students who preferred government and 56 percent of those who preferred the nonprofit sector said contractors would offer a better salary.

There were statistically significant demographic differences in these findings. Although all races agreed that nonprofits were not the place for big money, 57 percent of African-Americans said the higher salaries could be found in government, while 61 percent of whites said the higher salaries could be found with contractors. The explanation likely has to do with a mix of real-world experience and perceptions—African-Americans have, in fact, found government a more welcoming employer over the years, while whites are obviously less likely to worry about discrimination in the private sector.

Seniors were also convinced that benefits would be better in government than in either nonprofits or contractors. Even seniors who preferred a job with a nonprofit or contractor saw the advantage of benefits in government: 64 percent of seniors who preferred a nonprofit job thought government provided the best benefits, as did 61 percent of seniors who preferred a contractor job. Although there are no differences on these ratings by race, 71 percent of women seniors said government was the place to go for benefits, compared to 63 percent of men.

In contrast, the nonprofit sector was seen as the best place to go for respect of family and friends, the ability to make a difference, and the chance to help people. And, at least on the latter two dimensions (making a difference and helping people), nonprofits were seen as the place to go even by students who preferred jobs in either government or working for contractors.

As table 2 shows, government had only two clear advantages in this particular competition: (1) it was seen as by far the best place to go to serve the country, in large part because serving the country is perceived as an expression of patriotic duty, and (2) benefits.

In the head-to-head competition about making a difference and helping people, however, it runs a distant second to nonprofits. For example, only 27 percent of students who preferred a government public-service job said government was the best at helping people.

TABLE 2

% Who said **government** was better in providing each value

Value	Preferred public service job		
	Government	Nonprofit	Contractor
Benefits	78%	64%	61%
Respect of family and friends	52	25	36
Serving country	81	54	75
Helping people	27	5	12
Ability to make a difference	41	14	24

N=1,002

## MOTIVATIONS FOR WORK

These perceptions of government suggest serious problems in making the case for future service. It is one thing to emphasize the chance to serve the country in a moment of intense international concern and patriotic sentiment, and quite another to maintain that call during periods of calm. It is also one thing to recruit employees through such a call,

and quite another to honor that desire to serve in government organizations that are perceived by their own employees as over-layered, under-resourced, and beset by administrative red-tape.

These concerns became particularly clear when the seniors were asked what they most value in a job. As the list below shows, benefits ranked high on the list along with salary, public respect, and the opportunity to repay college loans ranked far below. The following list shows the percentages of students who said a particular job characteristic was a very important consideration:

1. Opportunity to help people: 67 percent
2. Benefits: 63 percent
3. Opportunity to do challenging work: 63 percent
4. Opportunity to learn new skills: 63 percent
5. Job security: 60 percent
6. Opportunity for advancement: 56 percent
7. Opportunity to repay college loans: 43 percent
8. Salary: 30 percent

Interestingly, students with high levels of debt were no more interested in salary than students without any debt at all. Rather, they were interested in jobs that provided the opportunity to repay college loans: 67 percent of students with more than \$20,000 in debt said repaying college loans was a very important consideration in their decision about where to work after graduation, compared to just 11 percent who had no debt at all. (One can only wonder why a senior with no debt would worry at all—they may have simply associated loan repayment as part of a generally good compensation package, for example.)

However, two-thirds of students with more than \$20,000 in debt said the opportunity to repay college loans was a very important consideration as they look for work, compared to just 17 percent of students with \$10,000 or less. But even for students

with high levels of debt, the opportunity to help people was still the number one consideration in any job.

These expectations vary by preferred job in only three cases. Seniors who preferred a public service job in the nonprofit sector were significantly less likely than their peers who preferred jobs in government or contractors to emphasize the opportunity for advancement and job security, while students who preferred jobs with contractors were significantly more likely to emphasize salary. These findings are summarized in table 3. In these three areas, seniors appear to recognize the realities of just what life is like in the nonprofit sector—lower salaries and less security—and understand that going to work for a contractor provides significant material reward.

TABLE 3

% Job preference by very important considerations

Consideration	Preferred public service job		
	Government	Nonprofit	Contractor
Salary	27%	23%	42%
Security	67	49	71
Advancement	64	47	66

N=1,002

One final point about government as a destination for public service: Asked how much time a person should work in government during such a career, four percent of the seniors either said “no time at all” or simply did not know, 26 percent said less than five years, 31 percent said five to ten years, and only 17 percent said more than ten years. The rest did not know. Even among the seniors who said they would prefer a public service job in government, more than half (53 percent) said a person should spend ten years or less in government as part of their careers.



Government is not the only sector to confront an impatient workforce, however. Asked how long a person should stay with any given employer before moving on, 39 percent of the seniors said less than five years, 32 percent said five to ten years, just 9 percent said more than ten years, and the rest did not know. Students who preferred public service jobs with contractors were the most impatient—46 percent said a person should stay less than five years—while those who preferred government were the least impatient—34 percent of these seniors said less than five years.

These findings suggest that all three sectors are dealing with a highly mobile workforce, and need to prepare themselves for turnover. This may have less to do with the sectors and much more to do with the job market itself. All three sectors have proven themselves very effective at downsizing and cutbacks, creating a basic expectation among potential employees that it is best not to stay on very long with any one employer.

Thus, it appears reasonable to encourage all public service employers to offer more opportunity for lateral movement in and out of the workforce at various points in careers. The thirty-year career is largely an illusion to these seniors—although some may well go to government and stay through retirement, almost none believe they will do so. To the extent that employers such as government advertise themselves as the best place to go for long-term service, they may well create more resistance than enthusiasm.

## BEING PREPARED

Asked about the sources of career advice, 42 percent of the seniors said their parents were the most important source of advice, followed by professors (22 percent), friends (10 percent), past or current contacts where they volunteered or interned (8

percent), past or current work associates (also 8 percent), staff at their college or university's office of career services (6 percent), and staff at their college or university's office of volunteer/service learning office (5 percent). Almost a quarter of the seniors had never visited their career services office, almost a third had only been there once or twice, but roughly a third had been there four or more times.

Seniors who said they preferred a public-service job with a contractor were more likely to say their parents were the most important source of career advice (52 percent) than those who preferred either government (42 percent) or a nonprofit (32 percent). To the extent government and nonprofits want to increase their attractiveness to future recruits, they might look to the parents.

Asked about graduate education, 68 percent of the seniors said a masters degree in public policy or administration would be very useful for a career in public service, followed by a masters degree in the social sciences more generally (56 percent), a law degree (50 percent), and a masters degree in business administration (48 percent).

## GETTING IN

As a whole, seniors are generally uninformed about actually finding a public service job in any of the sectors: only 44 percent said they knew a great deal or fair amount about finding a job either in government or a nonprofit, and just 30 percent said the same about their knowledge about contractors.

But what they do know, or at least believe, is that government is the most difficult sector to enter of all: 70 percent said getting a job in government would be very or

somewhat difficult, compared to 62 percent who said the same about contractors, and just 37 percent who said the same about nonprofits.

At least part of the answer resides in views of the hiring process itself. The seniors were absolutely convinced that the government hiring process was grossly inefficient and difficult to understand. As table 4 shows,

TABLE 4

Views of the Hiring Process

Attribute	Government	Nonprofit	Contractor
Simple	30%	69%	52%
Fast	14	56	52
Fair	77	89	74

N=1,002

It is particularly interesting to note that students are much more willing to give contractors the benefit of the doubt on the hiring process, while reserving their greatest scorn for government. Perhaps they simply assume that businesses that work for government will have at least some of the attributes commonly associated with making profits, meaning speed and simplicity. Or perhaps they simply assume that all government hiring will be bad. Even seniors who said they preferred a job in government were hardly enthusiastic about the hiring process: only 40 percent described it as simple, only 16 percent described it as fast, and 83 percent described it as fair.

## THE VALUE OF PAST CONTACT

All respondents were asked whether they had ever volunteered, interned, or worked for government, nonprofits, and/or contractors. As noted above, more than half of the seniors had at least some past contact with the nonprofit sector, compared to just 8 percent with the federal government, 10 percent with contractors, and 11 percent with either state or local government.

Regardless of the sector, seniors said this contact had increased the likelihood that they would consider working in a given sector after graduation. Asked about the kinds of jobs they saw people doing in the sector where they volunteered, interned, or worked, the seniors generally agreed that there was no difference across the sectors in job stress (roughly a quarter said the word “stressful” described the jobs they saw very well) or dead-ends (roughly a tenth said the word “dead-end” described the jobs very well). However, there were significant differences in three areas:

- 61 percent of the seniors said the word “valued” described the jobs they saw in the nonprofit sector very well, compared to 43 percent in both government and with contractors.
- 48 percent and 50 percent said the word “challenging” described the jobs they saw in the nonprofit sector and contractors very well, compared to 38 percent in government.
- 13 percent said the word “frustrating” described the jobs they saw with contractors, compared to 24 percent each in nonprofits and government.

In other words, students who spent time in the nonprofit sector came away feeling the jobs were more valued, challenging, but frustrating than students in the other sectors. Students who spent time with contractors came away feeling that the jobs were challenging and less frustrating, but not as valued. And students who spent time in government came away feeling that the jobs were only more frustrating.

## CONCLUSION

There is both hope and despair in these findings for government. It has a persistent reputation as a place that does not do well in meeting student expectations on most of the things they value in a job. It is also seen less than stellar in helping people, spending money wisely, and being fair. Most importantly for recruiting, it is seen as a very difficult place to get a job, and does not show as well as it should among the students it attracts for volunteer opportunities, internships, or paid work.

The good news is that it is seen as by far the best place to go to serve one's country, which is no small recruiting advantage indeed. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence in this and other Center for Public Service work to suggest that government's young recruits, especially those on the front-lines, are frustrated with the lack of resources to do their jobs.

The undisputed winner in this study is the nonprofit sector. It is viewed as by far the best place to go in all aspects of performance, most importantly for helping people. For students who define public service in such a tactile way, the words "nonprofit" and "public service" are almost synonymous. The bad news is that the sector lags behind on two of the most important things that the seniors said were very important considerations

in a job: benefits and job security. These are probably not something to write home about either.

Contractors emerge as destination with very little identity beyond a sense, arguably quite close to reality, that they provide the highest salaries. For students interested in public service careers, that may not be much of an advertising slogan.

Viewed as a whole, the survey does confirm one wonderful finding: America's young people are extraordinarily interested in public service careers. The challenge is not making the case for service at all. It is in closing the deal.

The sector that figures out how best to match its advantages with student motivations will be the one best configured to win the war for talent in the coming years.

- For government, this may mean the kind of radical reform that will send a message to young Americans and their parents to take a second look.
- For nonprofits, this may mean confronting the realities of low pay, uncertain futures, and meager benefits.
- For contractors, this may mean a campaign to inform young Americans about how their work helps the country meet its obligations.

At this point in time, however, the future workforce is still up for grabs. The sector that moves fastest toward addressing its problems and emphasizing its strengths may well be the sector that wins the war for public service talent for a long time to come.