



THE FUTURE OF WORK

Teaching Students the Value of a Career in Government

A public service academy at Arizona State University is helping students consider a career in the public sector. As other universities offer similar programs, will they succeed in expanding the talent pool for government?

March 10, 2022 • Carl Smith



Miami Dade College student Fabiana Gonzalez, 20, listens to a presentation during Miami Hack Week at the college's Wolfson Campus on Tuesday, Jan. 25, 2022.

(Al Diaz/TNS)

The need for public-sector services is greater than ever, but the challenges involved in finding workers to provide them continue to grow. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, job openings in state and local government increased [more than 50 percent](#) between December 2020 and December 2021.

The desire for better pay and benefits has been a driving factor in the "Great Resignation," but an [analysis](#) of Labor Department data by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that over the past year, growth in hourly wages in the private sector has exceeded public-sector wage growth "by the largest margin on record." Moreover, public-sector pay is not keeping pace with inflation.

"State and local governments are having a hard time — not only on the recruitment side, but also with labor outflows in terms of retirements, folks changing sectors or perhaps going from one government to another government," says Joshua Franzel, managing director of MissionSquare Research Institute.

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Some state and local entities are increasing pay to keep up with the competition. But two years of federal stimulus funds aren't enough to guarantee that they will be able to keep long-term commitments if pay is increased to attract workers.

Pay isn't the only hurdle to overcome. Local labor markets often don't provide an adequate supply of applicants with the skill sets required for jobs that governments need to fill, says Franzel.

Even amid current job market disruption, the public sector does have one distinct competitive advantage. According to a [new study](#) by Cognizant, a private-sector company with more than 300,000 employees, the vast majority of millennial and Gen Z workers expect employers "to be highly committed to having a positive impact on the environment and on the wider society."

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Public-sector employers can offer such a work culture, as well as the stability and flexibility that many workers seek. A network of programs at universities around the country hope to help students from diverse backgrounds and academic interests discover how the skills they are gaining can be applied to public service.

Job Openings (thousands)



Chart: Governing • Source: [BLS, Feb 2022](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Knowledge, Networks and Desire

In 2015, Brett Hunt came to Arizona State University (ASU) to implement a program in its Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions that had been conceived by its president, Michael M. Crow, and veteran NBC newscaster Tom Brokaw.

The idea was to create something similar to the ROTC, but rather than training future military officers, it would introduce students to the world of public service. Hunt brought two decades of experience in public service to his new job, having served as a captain in the U.S. Army and a foreign service officer at the Department of State.

“The issues facing our nation and our world are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected,” says Crow. “In order to have a functioning democracy and to continue to move society forward we need leaders who understand how key sectors overlap – military, government, private and nonprofit groups – and how to leverage them to develop solutions.”

ASU's Next Generation Service Corps (NGSC) is a four-year program that includes coursework on cross-sector leadership and collaboration, annual retreats, service activities and leadership seminars. Students are required to complete internships in three different sectors: nonprofit/social, private and public/government. They are grouped into "mission teams" based on shared interest in a range of social issues, from education, health-care access and immigration to sustainability, national security and human trafficking.

NGSC makes a concerted effort to attract students from a wide variety of majors, instilling in them a desire to make public service a core value of their professional life, no matter where they work. As Crow puts it, the goal is to arm students with "the knowledge, networks and desire to drive change for the greater good through their own chosen social mission."

Tapping into each student's passion is essential to driving the learning experience, says Hunt. "We constantly challenge them. If you really care about poverty, how are you advancing that? Is it serving on board, being on a city commission, at some point moving into government?"

A Chance to Do Big Things

Christopher Frias, a member of the inaugural NGSC cohort, began an internship with the Arizona Department of Economic Security in the final semester of his senior year and has been working there ever since.

Frias learned of the finance internship while working as a page for the Arizona state Senate (another corps experience), manifesting the networking skills the program seeks to cultivate. "I wanted that full-time experience prior to graduating, so I could decide whether I wanted to go straight into graduate school after graduation."

He liked the work and transitioned to a full-time job when he finished at ASU. Frias has been promoted through his three years in government financial services, something he doesn't think would have happened in the private sector. NGSC also opened his eyes to the scope of work that can be accomplished with public-sector funds.

“You kind of get the best of both worlds between private and nonprofit, where you are working explicitly towards public service but you're working within a decent fund to really make an impact on these issues,” he says. At present, his job involves planning and managing portions of \$1.2 billion in federal pandemic relief to support programs such as child-care assistance.

Mustafa Alalusi, an engineering student, transferred to ASU from a community college to become a corps member. He had already worked with a global nonprofit organization, traveling to Haiti and the Caribbean to assist in hurricane relief efforts. His counselor urged him to apply to NGSC and helped him through the process.

“It was a great platform for me to see how the three sectors [private, nonprofit, public] work together,” he says. “How can we ramp up the efforts between the amazing minds in all three and have them work with each other, using their skill sets to solve problems?”

His NGSC experience helped him align his purpose with his degree, to consider how it could not only help him provide for his family but benefit people locally, or even globally. He’s currently finishing an internship in the city of Mesa’s engineering department, on the path to becoming a full-time employee.

In 2021, Brett Hunt went to work for the Volcker Alliance as director of its Next Generation Service Corps initiative. To date, 11 universities have joined this network, with more on the way. The long-term goal, says Hunt, is to have a service corps in every state, and there is no intention for them to all be exactly the same. One of the newest is at Indiana University.

Former Governor Evan Bayh addresses students at the launch of the NextGen leadership program at Indiana University.
(Indiana University)

Leading for the Greater Good

Brian Seavey is the director of undergraduate admission and student engagement at Indiana University's O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs. He's also director of its NextGeneration Leadership Program, which launched in October 2021.

Seavey's path to this new project came through the Peace Corps in Mali, West Africa; public health consulting in Senegal for Columbia University's Earth Institute; and developing global health education programs at Yale and Duke universities.

Indiana University (IU) jumped at the chance to submit a proposal to launch a NextGen program on campus, he says. "The O'Neill school's purpose is that students are leading for the greater good," he says. "This overlapped with what

we were already doing, but it also provided space for us to think about it in a different way.”

The big goal is to help students understand how they can incorporate public service into their career. The O’Neill school has degree programs in public policy and public management, and Seavey didn’t want to create a program on top of those that already existed.

“We wanted to capture students who have an interest in public service, whether it’s a budding interest or serious interest, but are thinking about developing a different skill set — whether that is business, journalism, art or even something in the humanities — and provide them an opportunity to explore public service.”

The IU program is not a minor and is not focused on credit-bearing activities in the same way as the program at ASU. It includes workshops on leadership and advocacy and a general education class on public service open to all students on campus. Seminars expose students to varying perspectives in public service, from the Indianapolis Colts’ diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to what it’s like to serve in Congress.

Seavey has been impressed with the interest students have shown in the program. The pandemic has changed how students view the role of public service and government, he says. Some don’t feel that current public servants are representing them in the ways they would like to be represented.

Internship Issues

As he works to build relationships between NextGen programs and public-sector organizations, it’s become evident to Hunt that the private sector does a much better job of getting in front of students and helping them see the opportunities than the public sector does.

“Government needs to do more of that, engaging with programs like ours to pique student interest in the opportunities that exist in government,” he says.

He’s also found that there’s room for improvement in internship and hiring

processes. “A lot of government agencies have internship programs, but some are in name only because they've been neglected, or nobody has the time or the portfolio to advance them.” Streamlining the process of screening and onboarding interns at the undergraduate level could be a big factor in attracting high-quality talent.

Paid internships are critical if government employers want to attract underrepresented groups. “Where they can figure out how to pay students that are in internships, they will automatically diversify the population that’s coming into those internships,” Hunt says.

MissionSquare Director of Research Rivka Liss-Levinson sees another benefit to programs that encourage a commitment to public service in students. One of the things that comes through loud and clear in her surveys is that high levels of burnout are causing more people to leave and increasing strain for the workers who remain.

“Programs that are seeking out young people to join the workforce could be huge in terms of the energy and new perspectives that they bring,” she says. “It’s a welcome influx of people who can help combat some of that burnout and lack of morale, and maybe even help remind people in state and local government why they got into their jobs in the first place.”

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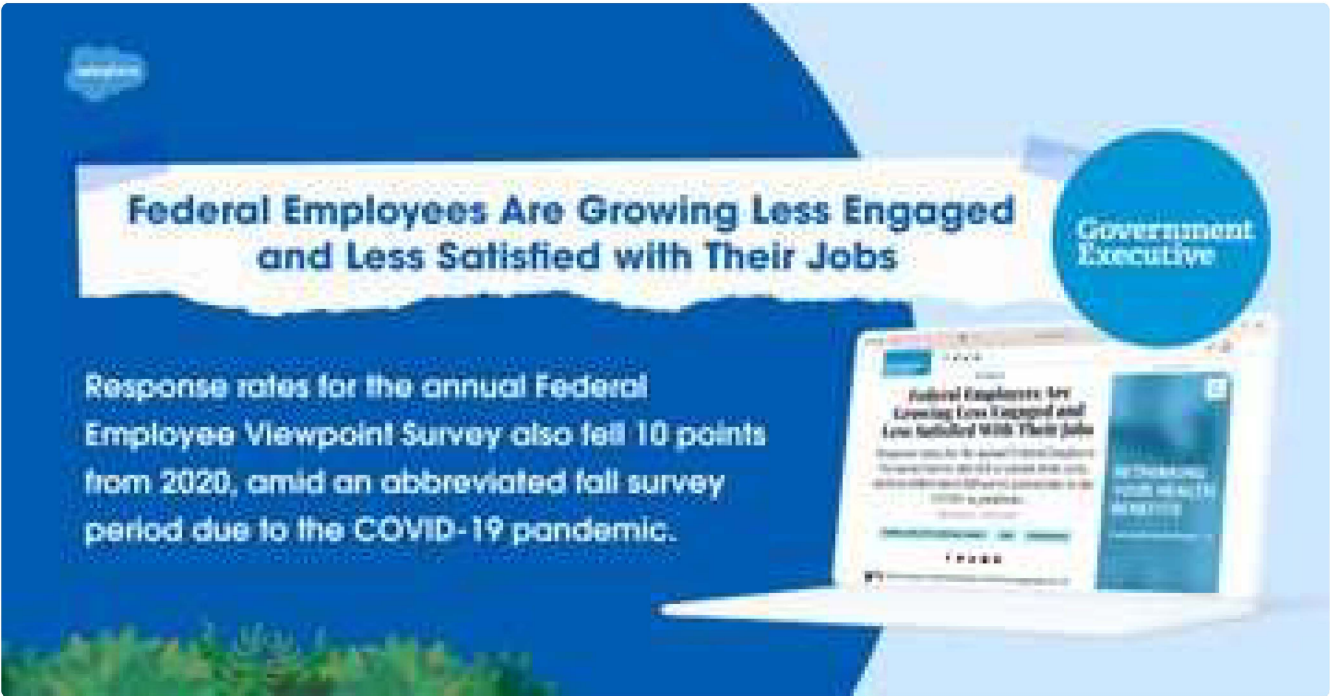
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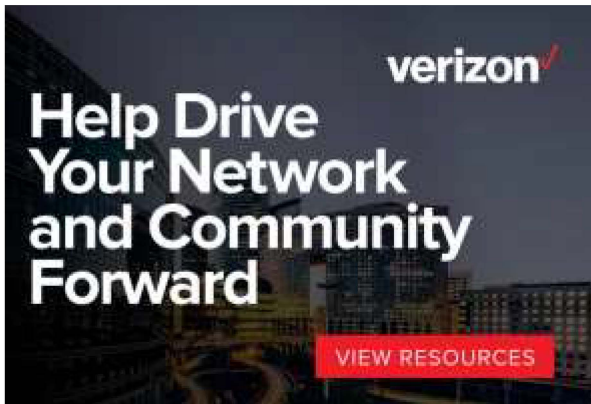
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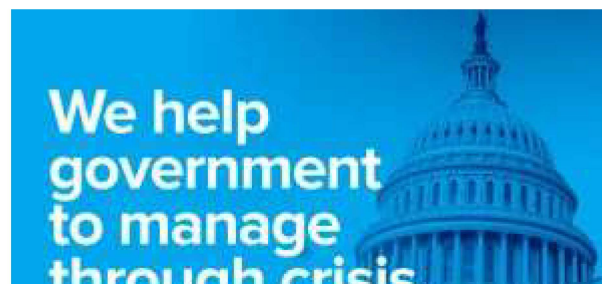
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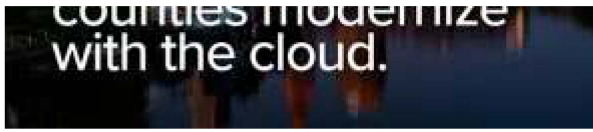
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