



# FEDERAL LEADERS FACE CHALLENGES ATTRACTING TOP COLLEGE GRADUATES TO GOVERNMENT SERVICE

Where do today's college students plan to work after graduation and what do they want from an employer when they enter the workforce?

The Partnership for Public Service analyzed the results of the 2011 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Student Survey that asked students a battery of questions about their employment plans, including what they would like in their first job, their salary expectations and whether they intend to be employed in the public sector. NACE surveyed 35,401 students from 599 colleges and universities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The results are both alarming and replete with challenges for federal hiring managers and human resources professionals who are charged with attracting a new generation of skilled employees to our government.

Most startling was a finding that just 6 percent of the college students who were surveyed plan to work in government at the local, state or federal level, the lowest number expressing an intention to join the public sector since

the NACE survey first asked the question in 2008. The survey for the first time in 2011 asked specifically about federal employment aspirations, with only 2.3 percent of the respondents reporting that they plan to work for the U.S. government.

The survey also suggests that federal agencies will continue to encounter tough competition for the top graduates in hard-to-fill jobs that require skills in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. Of the 6,868 STEM majors surveyed, more than one-third (36.7 percent) said they plan to enter the private sector. Another 33.9 percent intend to go to graduate school, while only 3 percent of this group said they intend to work for the federal government. The remainder plan to go to non-profits, teach or pursue other endeavors.

While the overall portrait suggests that the federal government faces a tough road attracting the top college graduates, it presents an opportunity for managers to better understand students' expectations and desires, and illustrates the need to accentuate the desirable aspects of public service in their recruitment initiatives.

## What do students plan to do after graduation?

The NACE survey finds that only 2.3 percent of the respondents plan to work in the federal government after leaving school, while almost 30 percent intend to seek employment in the private sector, and about 18 percent have set their sights on the non-profit field or teaching. The rest are looking at graduate school, the military or other options.

More former federal interns (17.9 percent) plan on working for the federal government than students without that experience, yet they still place public service behind employment in the private sector (25.3 percent). Students in STEM fields list the private and non-profit sectors as better options than the federal government.

The number of students planning to join government service at any level has declined for the past two years, according to the NACE data. In 2008, 8.4 percent of the respondents expressed plans to work at the local, state or federal level. That number rose to 10.2 percent in 2009, but dropped to 7.4 percent in 2010 and 6 percent in 2011 even with the struggling economy.

## What do students want in a first job?

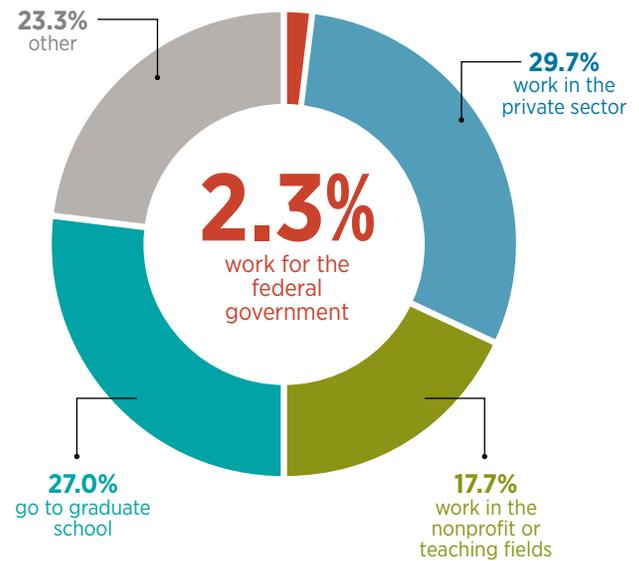
Students were asked to rate 15 first-job characteristics ranging from a high starting salary and friendly co-workers to a recognized brand. The opportunity for personal growth is the number one attribute, job security is second, good benefits third and a high starting salary ranks fourth. Having a diverse and tolerant workplace, a casual atmosphere and clearly defined expectations are the three least important attributes for students.

Men and women both prefer job security and personal growth above all other issues, but men have higher expectations regarding a high starting salary, while women tend to focus more on good benefits.

Two-thirds of students (66 percent) expect to make between \$20,000 and \$50,000 in their first position, while 15.4 percent expect to make above \$60,000 per year.

Majors in the STEM fields place high importance on their starting salary, with 30.5 percent expecting to make above \$60,000 per year. However, starting salaries for new federal employees with undergraduate degrees frequently are not competitive with many private sector employers. As new federal employees, students can generally anticipate making (with a few exceptions for certain agencies) between \$34,075 and \$42,209 in the Washington, D.C. area and slightly more or less in other parts of the country depending on local labor costs.

## What students plan to do after graduation



## What students want in a first job

MOST IMPORTANT FIRST-JOB CHARACTERISTICS	PERCENTAGE OF TOP TWO RESPONSES
Opportunity for personal growth	18.5%
Job security	14.4%
Good benefits	10.7%
High starting salary	8.9%
Improve the community	8.4%
Friendly co-workers	7.9%
Diversity	4.5%
Close to home	4.3%
Recognition	4.1%
Rapid advancement	4.0%
Recognized brand	3.9%
Self expression	3.8%
Clearly defined expectations	2.9%
Casual atmosphere	2.1%
Diverse and tolerant	1.4%

## Life in the student's shoes: The recession's effect on college students

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For many students entering the workforce, external forces relating to their job search weigh heavily on their minds. A majority of students (67 percent) worry about finding a job after graduation, and just over half (53 percent) believe the troubled economy will affect their job search. About a third of college students (32.6 percent) begin their job search at least a year before their expected graduation date, while 53.2 percent say they will begin their job hunt less than six months before they leave the campus and enter the working world.

Men report starting their job search earlier than women, yet the survey also finds that women express more worry (70.6 percent) about finding a job than male respondents (59.4 percent).

The survey reveals that students who plan to enter public service start their employment search earlier than those entering other sectors. Nevertheless, this does not translate into quicker job offers, with public service-minded students no more likely to have a job in hand than students planning employment in other sectors.

## NACE SURVEY METHODOLOGY

From February 18th to April 30th, 2011, The National Association of Colleges and Employers, (NACE) conducted an online survey among a sample of 35,401 college students (freshmen through PhD.) from 599 colleges and universities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia who reported themselves as US citizens.<sup>1</sup> The sample has been provided by NACE, and the survey is hosted and data collected by Student Voice. The survey examines college student recruitment, students' plans and expectations after graduation, desirable employee attributes and benefits as well as full demographics.

The Partnership presents this analysis in collaboration with NACE, looking at three key groups based on employment plans in the following fields:

1. Federal government employment
2. Private sector employment
3. Non-profit/teaching employment

The total number of completes among these groups are broken out as follows:

- Interview dates: February 18 – April 30, 2011
- Federal Government (N=825)
- Private Sector (N=10,467)
- Non-profit Sector (N=6,282)

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level for results based on the breakouts of student post-graduate plans. The margin of sampling error is lower and varies for results based on the entire sample of U.S. citizen students.

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<sup>1</sup> Full details on participating Universities are available from NACE at [research@naceweb.org](mailto:research@naceweb.org) or via the NACE website: [naceweb.org/Research/Student/Student\\_Survey.aspx](http://naceweb.org/Research/Student/Student_Survey.aspx).