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2008

### Volunteers: An Untapped Resource

Maria J. D'Agostino  
*CUNY John Jay College*

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The federal government can look close at hand to find a long-term solution for stocking the workforce.



## Volunteers: An Untapped Resource

by Maria J. D'Agostino

According to *Tapping America*, a 2002 report by the Partnership for Public Service (PPS), the federal government needs to hire more than 250,000 employees within the next two years. At the same time, it is facing the looming prospect of a shortage of qualified workers, due in part to the retiring baby boomers and the reassignment of program managers and analysts to the Department of Homeland Security. The government has launched several initiatives to offset this shortage, but finding solutions to recruit and retain the best-qualified college graduates has become critical, as young college graduates prefer to work in the nonprofit or private sectors.

The disinterest of youth in public service has several reasons, including the image of government as unchallenging and unprofitable. This negative perception contributes to the difficulty recruiting qualified college graduates. Several programs have been implemented to deal with this problem. The PPS, for example, has developed a number of initiatives, including better recruitment of government interns, loan forgiveness programs, and Call to Serve. These efforts are positive but have overlooked recruiting those who would be most favorably disposed toward government work—volunteers.

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*Maria J. D'Agostino is assistant professor, Department of Public Management, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. She can be reached at [mdagostino@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:mdagostino@jjay.cuny.edu)*

## Volunteers

Volunteers are highly motivated to help others and make a difference. They are driven by their commitment to solve social or political problems, not by monetary benefits. Several calls have been made, recently and throughout history, to serve through volunteering, most often to offset budgetary cuts and shrinking government. Volunteer rates of college students are at a record high. Approximately 3.3 million college students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four have participated in volunteer activity throughout the United States. Volunteer contributions by college students are not simply “one-shot” stints—they include long-term, committed volunteers—nor do college students only volunteer in nonprofit organizations.

Many college students volunteer in federal government agencies. More significant, many of them are volun-

teering in agencies where new workers will need to be hired for mission-critical jobs. For example, college students at Montana State University participated in excavations in Carbon County and inventoried more than eight hundred acres of critical environmental concern while volunteering with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; Smith College engineering students volunteered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to restore access to the spawning and rearing habitat for anadromous fish on the Town River in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts; National Park Service volunteers worked on a wetland prairie restoration project and removed invasive tree species and planted slash pines for a pineland.

## Federal Government Opportunities

Contrary to mainstream perception, the federal government pro-

vides many opportunities to pursue challenging careers as well as learn and apply new skills. Federal government college student volunteers can attest to this. Unfortunately, these highly motivated volunteers are developing skills in the federal government and then being left to pursue careers in the nonprofit or private sector. Why haven't we tapped into this enduring government resource?

The government should begin initiatives to consider current federal college volunteers for agency employment. They should be included in agency recruitment plans and offered opportunities to apply for available job openings. They should also be part of the Speaker's Bureau developed by PPS. Such initiatives would help shatter the long-standing negative perception of government among youth and supply an untapped pool of human capital to prevent current and future crises.



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