

# Private gain, public loss

## Why policy students opt out of public service

Working Paper 2

Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University



# **Private gain, public loss**

## *Why policy students opt out of government service*

by **Phil Primack**

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, recruiters for the armed services reported that they were besieged with inquiries about enlistment in the U.S. military. The Reserve Officers Training Corps at Northeastern University, Boston University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology report getting twice as many inquiries about enlistment that they got last year. The number of applications received by the Air Force ROTC headquarters at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama rose from about 550 to more than 3,000 in the past year. Meanwhile, a group of Harvard students organized a petition campaign to restore the ROTC program at the university. “Most people here think about going to Wall Street or consulting after school,” said Charles Cromwell, a senior at Harvard who is pursuing ROTC at MIT. “I think that’s going to change now. A lot more are talking about serving their country – and that’s why we want formal recognition now.”

The idea of public service – making a commitment to work for the good of the larger community – has made a comeback of sorts in the U.S. in recent years. Even before the events of September 11, many high schools around the nation instituted public-service requirements for graduation. AmeriCorps, a domestic version of the Peace Corps, attracted thousands of young people to work in inner-city and rural communities. Teach for America recruited recent college graduates to tackle the tough job of making public education work in the inner city. The idea that public service should come in many sizes and shapes has taken hold in communities across the nation.

But at the same time that public service has taken hold of the national imagination in new forms, the old-fashioned concept of service in government has suffered, especially in state and local government. Public officials report that attracting the “best and brightest” to government service has become more difficult in recent years as opportunities in the public and nonprofit sectors have proliferated. Even in graduate and professional schools of public policy, the number of students seeking to take government jobs has steadily declined in recent years. The number of students seeking jobs in state and local government – where the

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opportunity to make a policy impact is the greatest – has been most troubling of all.

The reasons behind the decline of public policy graduates entering the public sector are many and varied. To begin, a growing number of graduates – even those who want to work on state and local policy – are opting for employment in the private and nonprofit sectors. Because of the growing practice of government to “outsource” many projects, there are many exciting public policy projects outside the public sector.

At the same time, many students who might be interested in public-sector work have a hard time making the “connection” to appropriate public-sector jobs; at both the university end and the government end, old placement strategies do not work as well as they once did, and officials on both sides are scrambling to find new ways to connect qualified students and jobs. Making the connection is also hard because recruitment cycles put the public sector at a disadvantage. While prestigious consulting companies and corporate recruiters arrive on campus for their fall recruiting drives, public officials do not have their budgets or agendas set to sell to top students until the following spring or fall.

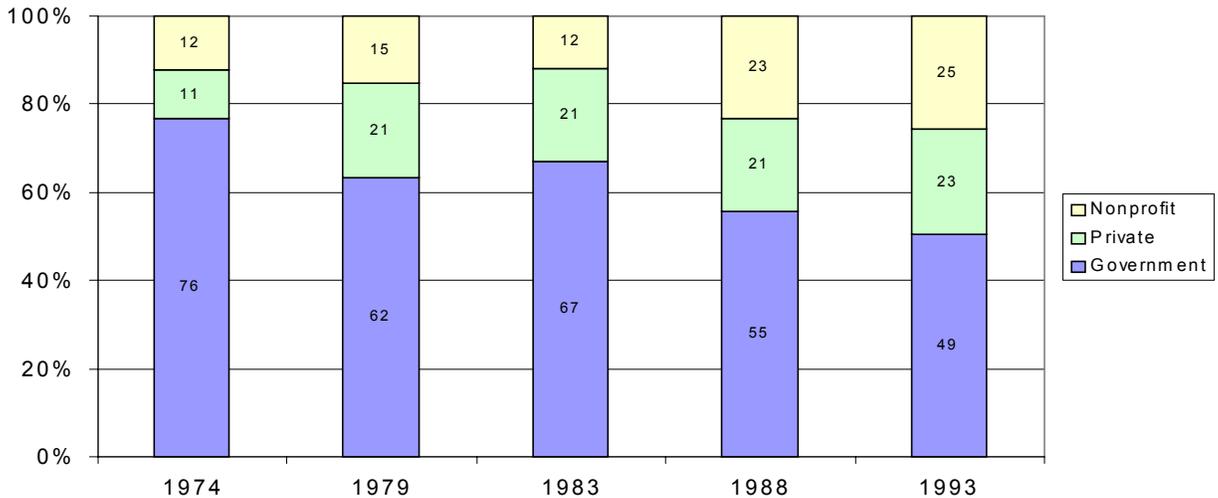
Many critics take to task the curriculum of policy programs, suggesting that an emphasis on technical policy analysis does not do enough to introduce students to the rough-and-tumble world of policy in the real world. Many case studies depict the government in a negative light, and many faculty and courses focus on technical skills – like quantitative policy analysis – rather than how to seize opportunities to make meaningful change in real-world policy.

Finally, there is the problem of money. Top graduate programs can put students as much as \$75,000 in debt, and paying off that debt can be difficult on a starting government salary.

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## Table 1: Nationwide shift

First jobs for graduates of the top 20 MPA programs

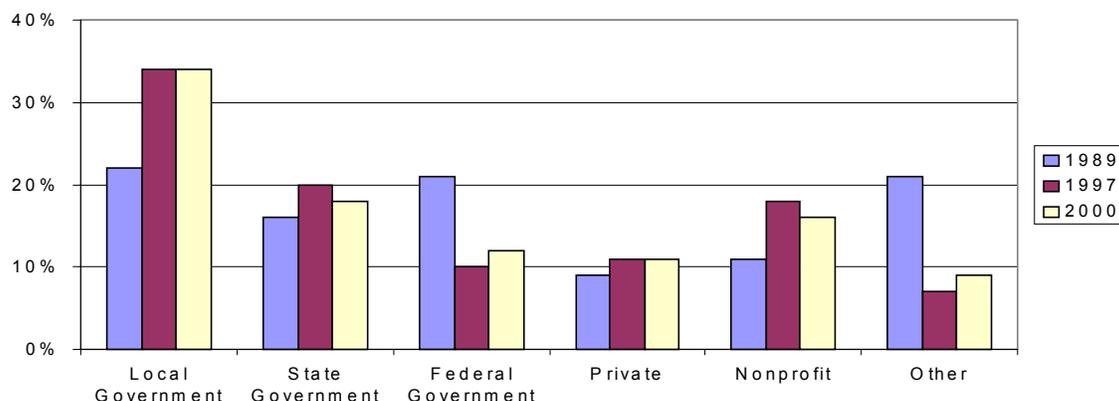


Source: Paul C. Light, *The New Public Service* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999)

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## Table 2: Inside the shift

Where graduates of the 250 NASPAA schools went to work



Source: National Association of Public Affairs and Administration

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Most universities offer debt relief for students who commit to public-sector work, but critics say the programs are not robust enough to encourage people to enter public service.

Confronting the crisis of the public sector in Massachusetts and Greater Boston matters. “Ultimately, effective governance is impossible if government cannot attract talented citizens to serve at all levels of the hierarchy,” wrote Paul C. Light, author of *The New Public Service*, director of the Center for Public Service at the Brookings Institution and adjunct professor at the Kennedy School. “Citizens cannot have confidence in the integrity of the democratic process if their leaders cannot honor their promises. Leaders cannot honor their promises if government cannot attract the talent necessary to draft and execute the laws.”

The problem is not confined to Greater Boston or Massachusetts. A generation ago, almost three-quarters of the graduates of nation’s elite masters programs in public policy went to work for the government; in recent years, only about half have chosen public service. Of those graduates entering public service, a greater portion are working at the state and local level. But a larger share of a smaller pie still poses problems for agencies in Massachusetts and the Boston region, officials say.

The Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston conducted a series of interviews with ground-level participants, including policy school students, faculty and staff, state officials, and others. The good news is that despite serious pay and a general denigration of public service in the past generation, skilled and energetic students remain interested in public service in state and local government, and state and local agencies remain interested in them. The bad news is that major gaps in communications, strategy, and approach impede effective matchmaking.

Some of these gaps may be easy to fill. Others, however, are more systemic.

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## Dimensions of the problem

Just as government – federal, state and local – has evolved in recent decades, so too have the ways that public policy schools such as the Kennedy School attract and train students interested in public sector work. That level of interest has itself waxed and waned, of course. Some political administrations – those of President John F. Kennedy, New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay and, closer to home, Massachusetts Governors Francis Sargent and Michael S. Dukakis are frequently cited examples – recruited heavily among universities for top managerial and policy posts. In more recent years, both the value and status of public service have been demeaned, by the press, by special interest groups and, often, by political leaders within government itself.

“There is a real talent problem within government,” said Joyce Stoia, director of the Campus Center Network at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. “You can’t beat up on government workers in the press and in speeches and expect bright young people to flock to your agency. Why would anyone go into a career that is routinely beaten up every two or four years?”

Adding this image problem are some very real deficits that come with governmental territory: Civil service and public employee union rules provide important protections, but they can also foster rigidity. And changing political winds can suddenly blow against policy initiatives or other work that drew graduates in the first place.

And then there is the “20 years and out” mindset: While public policy students may see government service as a worthy challenge, others see it as just a job. “There is a feeling when you actually go to work for a state or city agency that you’re entering this very rigid bureaucracy where you’re rewarded for putting in your time behind a desk, not for being a policy entrepreneur,” said one Kennedy School student.

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### Making Gen X-crats

The public sector struggles with an image that is anathema to GenXers in the career starting gate: that government work is boring, bureaucratic and leaves little room for advancement. For state and local governments seeking a recruiting edge, image may be everything. Right or wrong, many students these days not only perceive government jobs as dead ends,

but see politics and bureaucracy as barriers to accomplishing anything. Two reasons M.P.A.s give for choosing nonprofits are that they think they can move up faster in a smaller organization and that they feel closer to the point where their work makes a difference. Likewise, some favor consulting for the fast pace, the teamwork and the constant challenge of moving from one project to the next. Besides pay, the private sector is beating government in on-campus recruiting. At top schools,

consulting firms land on campus by late September. For graduating students who are already anxious about what they will do with their degrees, the firms offer the chance to have a job sealed up around New Year’s. State and local agencies, on the other hand, don’t do much on-campus recruiting. To the extent they do, it is mostly limited to springtime when they know what jobs will be open in May or June.

Christopher Swope, “Ways to Sway and M.P.A.,” *Governing*, June 2001.



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consultancy work is still in the realm of public service. Also consider that many services and tasks once performed by the public sector have been passed along to the private and non-profit sectors. This is an ongoing trend of private, public, and more recently non-profit sectors intermingling with each other ... This trend of movement away from the public sector may continue. However, that does not mean that public service is being put at risk.”

Others challenge this view that public service work is public service work, no matter the employer.

“A lot of other public policy schools ... have simply redefined their mission in light of the new job market and the changing nature of the ways students enter their careers,” Robert L. Hutchings, assistant dean at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton said in the January 7, 2001 *New York Times*. “When they place people with private sector consulting firms or work in private industries, they consider it a great success. We consider that we’ve missed somewhere if that’s the case.”

At the Kennedy School, administrators are troubled by the declining number of graduates entering public service. And they should be, said a former Kennedy School student who went to work for Massachusetts state government and now works in the private sector.

“It is true that many NGOs are doing what a lot of government agencies used to do,” said John Simon, former deputy director of research and development at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Administration and Finance. “And for some foreign students especially, the NGO is much more the equivalent of going to work for their country’s government. But in the United States, it’s fundamentally a bad thing if places like [the Kennedy School] are not putting out a significant number of people for the levels of government closest to the people. It’s supposed to be the Kennedy School of Government, not of consulting.”

## Hard numbers, softer conclusions

**B**ecause of the Rappaport Institute’s emphasis on local and regional issues, this paper focuses on the link between graduates of the Kennedy School and other public policy schools and their employment by state and local government. (The federal government is facing its own looming personnel shortfall, as spelled out in “Retirement Wave Creates Vacuum,” a six-part series in *The Washington Post* that began on May 7, 2000).

Table 3 summarizes job sector placements among graduates of the Kennedy School’s MPP program. (Graduates of the Master’s in Public Administration program are not included in this paper since a majority of them either return to previous employers or are international). The Kennedy School placement data do not show good news on the state and local government front:

- Overall public sector employment has steadily declined, from 55.2 percent in 1988 to an average of just over 41 percent from 1991-2000, dipping to a decade-low 33.6 percent in 2000.
- While the number of students going to work for federal or national employers dipped

slightly, those choosing local government work has fallen from 1988's 10.4 percent to a 1991-2000 average of 5.8 percent.

- State government took the sharpest hit, with the number of MPPs choosing work in that sector plummeting from 13.5 percent in 1988 to an average of 4.7 percent from 1991-2000 – and to a dismal 0.9 percent in 2000.
- The numbers of MPPs going to work for nonprofit or NGO employers has increased sharply. On average, however, twice as many MPPs chose the private sector over nonprofit or NGO employers.

To place this Kennedy School data into context, the Rappaport Institute contacted several other public policy schools. The survey produced mixed results.

Some schools reported far greater success at placing graduates in state and local jobs than the Kennedy School, while others appeared to fare about the same:

At the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs the percentage of graduates taking state and local jobs has held fairly steady, averaging 18.5 percent and 16.3 percent a year from 1990 to 1999. In 1999, 16 percent of graduates – just under the decade average – went to work for state government, but 24 percent – well over the average – took local or county government jobs. Over the decade, both the state and local sectors employed more Humphrey Institute graduates than the federal government.

The Maxwell School of Syracuse University reported that while overall government placements are down as compared to the 1970s and 1980s – when more than 30 percent of its two-year MPA graduates (its MPP equivalent) went to the state and local sectors – the state and local placement figure has held at “a steady 18 to 21 percent across the past six years,” with most of those placements with local government.

The Woodrow Wilson School graduates between 55 and 75 students a year in its two-year Master in Public Affairs degree program, of whom “considerably more than half” pursue international affairs careers. From 1985 to 2000, “domestically-focused students who

**Table 3: Class of 2000 employment demographics**  
Master of Public Policy program, Kennedy School of Government

	1988	1991	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
<b>Public/Overall</b>	55.2%	48.9%	38.5%	36.5%	33.7%	46.2%	51.5%	33.6%
<i>National-federal</i>	29.2%	31.5%	23.1%	20.0%	22.5%	29.0%	39.4%	24.3%
<i>State-provincial</i>	13.5%	9.8%	5.5%	5.9%	2.2%	6.5%	2.0%	0.9%
<i>Regional-local</i>	10.4%	4.3%	4.4%	8.2%	6.7%	4.3%	6.1%	6.5%
<i>Inter-governmental orgs.</i>	2.1%	3.3%	5.5%	2.4%	2.2%	6.5%	4.0%	1.9%
<b>Nonprofit/NGO</b>	12.5%	28.3%	22.0%	18.8%	15.7%	14.0%	10.1%	24.3%
<b>Private/Overall</b>	32.3%	22.8%	39.6%	44.7%	50.6%	39.8%	38.4%	42.1%
<i>Consulting-public</i>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7.5%	11.1%	13.1%
<i>Consulting-private</i>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	11.8%	13.1%	15.9%
<i>Other</i>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	20.4%	14.1%	13.1%

**Source:** Placement Report 2000, John F. Kennedy School of Government Career Services

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went to work in state and local government positions upon graduation ranged from a low of 1 to a high of 10, and averaged just over 5 per year,” the school reported.

The Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan had accurate data only for 1998-2000, which showed that the percentage of graduates taking state and local government jobs rose from 6 percent in 1998 to 11 percent in 2000. “While our number is small compared to other policy schools, I cannot say that I have seen a decline in student interest in state and local policy,” e-mailed career services director Jennifer Niggemeir. “If anything, our class last year and our currently enrolled students have expressed more of an interest in state and local opportunities.”

The University of Maryland’s School of Public Affairs reported a decline in the percentage of its graduates going to state and local government, which from 1997 to 2000 was 10 percent, 8 percent, 6 percent, and 5 percent. But federal government employment remained a steady 42 to 50 percent.

Comparing all of these schools might be like comparing apples and oranges, government and university observers both say. The Woodrow Wilson School, for example, limits its enrollment so that it can offer free tuition to all students – a calculated decision that lowers student debt but also reduces the number of students who can be trained for public service. State university tuition is also much lower than private university tuition. The competition from top corporations and consulting firms are also more stiff at Harvard’s Kennedy School and Princeton’s Wilson School than at state universities.

Whatever the differences among the universities, the decline in public service across the nation raises broader concerns for a new generation of government leadership. “It seems to many of us for some time that it’s become real difficult to recruit people into mid-level positions,” said Robert Weinberg, who has served in several state and city posts and directed the Graduate Public Management Program at Boston University. “And we pay a huge price for that. Your government simply runs better if you have good people in there.”

So why do the “good people” choose not to enter public service? And what can be done to change their minds?

## Primary causes

Interviewees cited three primary factors behind the decline in government service in general and state and local careerism in particular:

- *Financial pressures:* Public sector jobs pay far less than private sector equivalents, causing only immediate cash flow problems – especially for young graduates with new families and responsibilities – while making it even more difficult to retire student loan debt burdens.
- *Missed connections:* School career service offices do not fully and creatively locate and market public sector opportunities to students. And state and local agencies fail to fully and creatively market themselves to both career service offices and students themselves.

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- *Curriculum and other in-school practices:* While emphasizing hard analytic skills, policy schools may not prepare students for the political realities and skills necessary to not only develop policy, but to implement it. Schools need to deliver the message that while public sector jobs pay less, they offer more rapid advancement and can be just as stimulating and “hot” as any private sector option.

## Financial pressures

The disparity between private sector and public sector pay levels has grown sharply in recent years. Student X with the same qualifications as Student Y may take jobs with virtually identical demands and responsibilities – but Student X will make \$40,000 working for the state, while Student Y starts at \$100,000 at the consulting firm.

As one student put it: “I really care about local issues, but there are a lot of opportunities for me to work for an NGO and have an impact on local services in a way that I don’t end up living in debt for the next 40 years.”

Students seemed nonetheless willing to accept lower salaries – but only if ways are developed to help them ease or erase student-loan debt burdens. Until the Kennedy School expanded its loan-forgiveness program in April 2001, students became ineligible for the loan forgiveness program when their annual household income exceeded \$35,000 a year. Under the new Kennedy School system, graduates earning up to \$32,000 will receive full loan-forgiveness while serving in public-service positions; graduates earning between \$32,000 and \$39,000 will receive forgiveness of 75 percent of their loan payments; graduates earning between \$39,000 and \$45,000 will receive 50 percent assistance; and graduates earning between \$45,000 and \$50,000 will receive 25 percent forgiveness.

Even in a cooling economy, public jobs for the most part cannot compete with private sector salaries. Interviewees called for greater collaborative efforts between policy schools and public agencies to produce better programs for loan forgiveness or other forms of debt relief. Weinberg, for example, offered this informal proposal:

“Not all public jobs are the same – some pay poorly, others not so badly. Suppose the average salary for the equivalent job in the private sector is ‘X’ and it’s ‘Y’ in the public sector. For a student who takes the public job, there would be total debt deferral in the first year. The deferral would continue, but then it would be followed by loan forgiveness pro-rated over a period of years, based on your public salary compared to the average salary of your private sector peers. So the longer you stay in your public sector job, the more of your debt goes away. That’s also helpful for agencies, which often don’t want someone who gets all this great experience for a couple of years and then moves on to the private sector in

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search of the big bucks.”

Adds Lawrence S. DiCara, a former Boston City Council member and a onetime candidate for Mayor: “I don’t think most people my age understand the kinds of debt that most people enter to go to graduate school these days. There must be a way to let people work off their debt; other than that, it will become a less and less open avenue for students of modest means.”

While government is limited in what it can offer by way of financial incentives, it can do a far better job at marketing itself as a challenging workplace with great potential for rapid and meaningful advancement to higher-level positions that offer both better pay and greater challenges, said interviewees.

“People’s impressions of government work are wrong,” said Kennedy School Administrative Dean Barbara Salisbury, who administrative dean at the Kennedy School, who served in Massachusetts state government for 20 years, including as budget director from 1983 to 1989. “There are pockets of government that are every bit as high performing and populated as much by incredibly smart people as the most high-powered business setting.”

One Kennedy School student recalled working for a state agency after he received his bachelor’s degree but before he went to graduate school. “I loved my job, and the agency badly needed people. I had just been there for two years, and I was in my early 20s and in charge of \$5 million studies. If I’d gone to one of the consulting firms that we had hired to do those studies, I would have been just a research assistant. There is a lot of opportunity to move up quickly in government.”

As the Kennedy School’s Career Services Director John Noble put it, “In place of salary, put forward prestige and a little bit of power to get people interested in government.”

But to recall that old union organizing phrase at Harvard University, you cannot eat prestige. Or pay off debts with status.

Both the public and private sectors have proven able to develop financial incentives and

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## First impressions

We must all agree that there’s a need for public understanding and respect for government and the people who do the work of government, and the truth of the matter is, the general public didn’t then, and I think today didn’t really understand, or was not realistic in its expectations about what government could do for them and the relationship of that to their own lives. So

what unfortunately happens is that many conclusions about government and the people who work for government are drawn from narrow dealings with an agency, some personal fit that somebody had about dealing with the IRS, or some other agency, be it local or state level. Some of what the public thinks about government comes, frankly, out of a thirst for dirt. And out of the fact that many people campaigning for office

find it very easy to use government and the people who work for government as the issue, rather than dealing with the tough issues.

From Constance Newman, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, “Talent Pool or Brain Drain? Introducing the Public Service: A Panel Discussion about the New Public Service,” The Brookings Institution, January 19, 2000.

other responses when a labor commodity is in short supply or particular skills are sorely needed. Efforts to attract and retain engineers, scientists, and other technically skilled professionals are a current example. The burden is largely on public agencies to apply the same creativity to recruit talented and trained managers, policy analysts and others, said interviewees.

“Government has to find ways to supplement the extraordinarily low pay scales if you want to attract really talented people to do highly complicated work,” said Altshuler. “If the government wants any shot at all at attracting some of this top talent, it must use procedures that have little precedent in the public sector, but lots of precedent among private employers.”

The importance in salary structure varies from field to field. A starting attorney can make \$100,000 or more at a private firm but only about \$40,000 working for the state Attorney General’s Office. Information technology specialists and consultants in the private sector also earn several times the salary offered in the public sector. But in other fields, the salaries are more comparable. According to the U.S. Census, the mean hourly earnings for private industry and state and local government are often very close for jobs with the same skill levels. “It’s when you get into the senior level management positions that the differential starts to widen,” said Robert Van Giezen, a labor economist for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). “When you move to a higher grade in the public sector, the wage increase is minor compared to what it would be in the private sector. But before that, the differentials are small.”

The National Compensation Survey, released by the BLS in September 2000, lists the average hourly wages for positions at grades comparable to the Government Service (GS) system. An entry-level white-collar employee with Bachelor of Arts degree typically starts at Grade 7, while an entry-level worker with a Master’s degree starts at Grade 9. The “journey level” employee is at Grade 12. Supervisory positions begin at grade 14. Table 4 shows the compensations for white-collar positions for the Boston-Worcester-Lawrence Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. Salaries can be even more competitive in the public sector

**Table 4: Public and private pay in Greater Boston**

Grade Level	Private Industry Mean Salary	State and Local Government Mean Salary
7	\$20.41	\$29.95
8	\$22.94	\$20.69
9	\$24.82	\$30.00
10	\$27.96	\$20.35
11	\$33.33	\$31.55
12	\$42.92	\$43.29
13	\$51.49	n/a
14	\$55.95	n/a

**Source:** Bureau of Labor Statistics National Compensation Survey, September 2000

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than in the private sector at some levels. In fact, some conservative reform organizations have argued for reducing government pay and inducing public-sector employers to work more hours for their pay. (See, for example, The Cascade Policy Institute’s “Seven Principles of State Budget Reform,” available at <http://www.cascadepolicy.org>) But for ambitious graduates of elite universities, the prospect of minimal salary increases for greater performance and responsibility over the years can be a deterrent to entering public service.

## Missed connections

Virtually everyone interviewed for this report – students, public officials, academics and private sector experts – agreed that government and policy schools can do more to coordinate each other’s supply and demand lines. Interviewees said individual institutions must improve their internal recruiting, job development, and other efforts; and public agencies must communicate their needs, availabilities, and capabilities in more effective, and timely, ways.

Kennedy School students at a focus group conversation were disappointed to learn that a group of senior state and local government managers had been at the Kennedy School in the spring of 2001 for an executive training program – but that those officials had not been introduced to students seeking employment in state and local government. “When the school hosts gatherings like that, they should build time into their schedule, even a cocktail hour, for informal meeting between [the visiting executives] and students,” said one Kennedy School student. “That should be a no-brainer. A lot of us don’t even know how to start looking for a state or local job. And a lot of those managers don’t know about us.”

Students said the career services units of public policy schools could take a more active approach in identifying and promoting state and local career opportunities. But Harvard’s Noble points out that his office can only list jobs of which it has been made aware. He and others said government does a poor job at recruiting, especially compared to the private sector’s romancing of graduate students.

“We’ve been having discussions here about how we can engineer ways to make it easier for students to choose public service,” said Noble. “Obviously, the meager salaries are a key factor, but another issue is the quality and challenge of the work as it is presented to the students in a recruiting environment. For example, the consulting firms come early in the fall with very polished presentations. They bring along graduates who relate all kinds of interesting stories about what they do, the youthful environment, and the high salary. Compare that to the way state and local government recruit, which is often, ‘Look at our web site or fill out a form.’”

Martha Walz, a 2000 graduate of the Kennedy School’s MPA program, says that the public sector often dampens the innovative urges of the brightest and best students, who seek to do public service in the nonprofit sector. “When I was looking for a job last year, I felt the non-profit sector has become more of an exciting, innovative sector compared to government,” she said. “There are great things happening in the non-profit community, and

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its allure over government should not be underestimated. Both non-profit and government jobs pay badly, so salary differences do not explain a shift to non-profits. The fact that many non-profits rather than government agencies are doing cutting edge work, I suspect, is an important part of the explanation.”

David Yamada, faculty director of the Rappaport Honors Program in Law and Public Service at Suffolk University, agreed. “Very few of the agencies come to the campus to recruit,” he said. “But my guess is that few government or public interest entities would be left with vacant interview slots when they say they are going to come on campus.”

Yamada noted the heavier-than-expected number of applicants for Rappaport summer internships in state and local government. “Students are clearly interested, if they can find a way to exercise that interest,” he said.

State officials acknowledge that they must do more, both internally and externally, to recruit and retain policy students to state jobs.

“We need to take far greater advantage of the colleges and universities [throughout Massachusetts], especially in the Boston area,” said James Hartnett, personnel administrator for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. “This reaches beyond just personnel issues. We need to be partnering up through internships, even through working with the universities as a back door to their curriculum, helping to make it consistent with current public policy areas. But we have not approached this in any consolidated way within the Commonwealth, other than what some people may do sporadically.

“As an employer, we need to do a better job marketing ourselves. It’s a very tough, uphill battle. But we have to do more to get the word out that these are great jobs we have to offer. We need to make graduates understand that if they come to work for us, we can probably do

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## Commonwealth crunch

Massachusetts’ personnel system is stuck in a “command-and-control” mindset in an era when devolving responsibility out to the front lines has proved to be the most effective approach to good government. And that’s across a broad range of program, policy, and administrative areas, not just personnel. ... Some options:

§ One, the state needs to devolve testing and hiring to agencies and municipalities.

Right now, the central personnel office—which administers tests and maintains lists of eligible candidates—is an unnecessary bottleneck. Agencies know best who they need and how to evaluate them, so cut them loose to do that.

§ Two, a handful of states are doing very sophisticated strategic planning and recruitment. They’re looking at their entire workforce and figuring out what skill sets are going to be walking out the door. And they’re devising aggressive, targeted campaigns, in partnership with agencies, to make sure those agencies are refilling those

talent pools. I suggest in the report that Massachusetts make this a top priority.

§ Three, allow personnel people in agencies and municipalities to make on-the-spot job offers to qualified candidates. It sounds like a small thing, but it’s critical. Right now the state requires a job be posted for four weeks before it can be filled. In a tight labor market, you can’t wait that long.

From Jonathan Walters, “Civil Service Reform in Massachusetts,” Pioneer Institute Policy Dialogue, No.37, November

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more for their skill sets over a 24-month period than anything they can find in the private sector because of the diversification of what they can get involved with in the public sector.”

Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation President Michael Widmer, a former state official, said the compensation issue – especially with tighter budgets looming – will remain a tough nut for state government to crack. First, though, the state must vastly improve deal its own recruiting efforts, he said.

“State and local government has always been sort of a step child to the glamour of Washington, even when public service was considered more of a virtue than it is now,” Widmer said. “If state and local government is serious about it, their recruiting must be on a sustained basis, not just position by position. To do that, the Commonwealth needs to organize itself – right now, it’s like having 20 separate companies within state government, all with their own recruiting systems.”

But what if, for all its statements of intent, state government still fails to get its recruiting act together?

“The schools ought to pick up the cudgel if the state and its agencies aren’t doing the job themselves,” said Secretary of Administration and Finance Stephen Crosby. “If we’re not doing it, the schools should make it a basic part of their program to help their students understand what good public sector work is all about. And offer ways to get into it.”

Certainly, one of the most effective ways has been and will remain networking – formal and informal – between policy school students and alumni working in government. Alumni

such as Simon said they would be eager to help students better understand and line up state and local positions. But Simon noted that he has been asked to come back to speak about work in government only once in the five years since he graduated from the Kennedy School.

“I don’t understand why I don’t get a call every spring,” he said. “I’d look over the resumes in a second, and students would have a shot at getting a decent job. State government is a very insular place – if you name the last ten interesting jobs people got in government, you’ll find they got them through not some formal recruiting process, but because they networked.”

Therein lies a Catch 22: As fewer policy school graduates go to work in state and local government, that alumni network grows smaller.

“There used to be a lot more connections between the universities and state government,” said Glynn, who is now chief operating

officer for Partners HealthCare. “When I was at the welfare department, we hired a lot of people from Heller and the Kennedy School. One of the reasons government today is slow to react to things like the health care crisis is because they have no longer have anyone grinding through any of the data. When I was at welfare and met with the budget office,

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“State and local government has always been sort of a step child to the glamour of Washington, even when public service was considered more of a virtue . . .”  
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there would be 40 people there, most of whom went to Harvard or MIT.

“It used to be that a lot more people had a foot in the government and university camps. For a variety of reasons, those connections now are harder to make and maintain.”

Salisbury also stressed the connections issue. “A lot of people in government aren’t eager to hire Kennedy School graduates,” she said. “They don’t seek them out. And a lot of people don’t really understand what our degree is. You don’t need a credential to practice in public policy, unlike law or medicine. You don’t need it in business either, but all the major firms understand the value added by a Harvard MBA. There isn’t that same awareness in the public sector. We need to market our credential better, explaining what value is added by our degree and why we can offer someone who will do the job better than someone else.”

## Curriculum and other in-school practices

**A**t the heart of the discussion of the decline in public service is a basic question that educators tend to reserve for themselves: What kind of curriculum is best suited to train students for policy, administration and other public sector positions? Some interviewees said too much emphasis is given to hard, analytic skills – and not enough to the real-world political arena in which such work is done.

“The education at the Kennedy School is wrong,” said Robert Weinberg. “It’s premised on the theory that people are going to be doing policy. In fact, about 5 percent of a state and local (executive position) is policy analysis, and about 95 percent is policy management.”

Martin Linsky, lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School who served as Chief Secretary to Governor Weld, struck a similar note.

“From my experience here at the school and in government, I worry that we are training people for jobs [as policy analysts] that really don’t exist, and providing them with skills that may be needed in some abstract sense but are not highly valued in the world of government,” Linsky said. “Institutionally, the Kennedy School rests on the idea of speaking truth to power. The practical consequence of that is to devalue politics. Students get the message that their role is to squeeze the role of politics out of policy making, that politics is a dirty business, that politics gets in the way of good government. That’s not the way the real governmental world exists, especially at the state and local level.”

“In a different institutional environment, we could be elevating politics to the same plane as analysis and management, placing more emphasis on teaching students the arts and skills of politics rather than disdaining them. Our pre-professional students would leave here better prepared to adapt and to excel, and more of them might even consider running for office.”

Others agreed that the school could do more on linking politics and policy, but they said not all students interested in state and local jobs want to get involved in the political aspect.

Joe McCarthy of the Kennedy School is the first to acknowledge the difficulty of creating a curriculum that provides rigorous analytic skills and teaches the nuts and bolts of politics. He says: “I think we need more nuts and bolts classes than we have. David Pryor

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and Mickey Edwards are teaching a class this year on how to get elected, and that's a good thing. But the other side of the agenda is that we can't lose our policy [analysis] edge. We're trying to be all things to all people, and it's hard to balance the curriculum. If I could wave a magic wand, I would have tracks – a smaller core curriculum, maybe four or five courses, then let people choose tracks in international relations, state and local, whatever. Then you can get a really good education in your chosen field. But it's always going to be a challenge to balance policy and politics.”

“There are two kinds of people who come to work here,” said Crosby. “There are the ones who want to be purely involved in policy, and the ones who do know and like the politics. There is plenty of work for both.”

Former Governor Dukakis, distinguished professor of political science at Northeastern University, argues that programs like the Kennedy School and the Wilson School are not doing enough to prepare students to plunge into the difficult political problems inherent in making public policy. When policy students do not enter government, Dukakis said, it is a “reflection of the fact that we are not teaching practice. ... We need to teach those political skills you need to be effective in the public sector.” The use of case studies should help prepare students for real-world tradeoffs in policy and policy, Dukakis said. Referring to cases involving school segregation and welfare reform, Dukakis said: “In both cases, groups of policy makers were very smart but they had no political skills and were forced to deal with a huge problem.” When policy makers take a “highly academic” approach to the political challenges of policy, Dukakis said, they are more likely to fail.

All agreed on one area in which policy schools could do a better job: Conveying both the importance and value of public service, especially at the state and local level.

“The schools need to do a lot more work to explain to their students that it's a sign of honor not to have a job when you graduate,” said Weinberg. “The real need is not consulting firms, but getting someone willing to work for \$50,000 for a San Francisco or Chicago to solve real problems. And to convince students that if they stay for a few years with local government, they will be managing a whole department, while if they go to a consulting firm, they may end up just managing four other consultants after a few years.”

Martha Walz, the 2000 Kennedy School graduate, takes the argument a step further. In addition to their formal course work, students get a powerful informal education from other students as well as professors. But few students or faculty have the kind of experience that conveys the excitement of public sector work. “While I was at [the Kennedy School], there were very few students with government experience, virtually none with experience in campaigns and/or political parties, and very, very few elected officials,” she said. “If the school admitted more students with government, political, or electoral experience, including in the mid-career program, there would be a larger number of students who can be role models for their classmates, who can help classmates network, and who can provide some seriously needed inspiration. In short, I think the issue may, in part, be caused by the admissions office. My interest in political campaigns and local politics and government was quite unusual among my classmates.” Another student put the matter more starkly: “No one makes the case that government work is exciting.”

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Excitement breeds excitement. Public policy students need daily contact with peers who have worked in government service if they are to envision themselves entering public service.

## Toward a new model of public service

Ultimately, addressing the “brain drain” from the public sector might require rethinking the very nature of public service. Rather than considering government service a lifetime commitment, some experts say that stints in government should be considered part of a much more eclectic and varied career path.

Joseph S. Nye, the Dean of the Kennedy School and Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration, argues that the government needs to consider a complete overhaul of the civil service system to allow for greater compensation, better career training and career development, and the opportunity to move in and out of government service for specific periods. Nye writes in the August 22, 2001 *Washington Post*: “Many young people today see jobs as fluid; you do your best in one for a few years and then move on, rather than serving time climbing a bureaucratic ladder. Many want careers that will cross a number of organizations and perhaps all three sectors – public, nonprofit, and private. This is healthy for our society, but our government structure discourages it.”

Rebuilding government service ultimately depends on making it respond to the ambitions and career styles of professionals in all fields at all levels. When people want to make a contribution to the public weal, they need to be sought out, engaged, encouraged, and rewarded. Above all, they need to understand that government work – particularly at the state and local level, where direct service delivery occurs and innovation is possible – makes makes a profound impact on the lives of people.

The Kennedy School’s Barbara Salisbury said of government service: “We have an incredible product to market, but we haven’t marketed it properly. Government is the most exciting thing a young person can do. It involves compelling issues, in a highly political context, where coming up with an effective political strategy is as important as the right policy answer. How can business compete with that?”

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## About the author

Phil Primack has been a journalist for more than 30 years. Primack currently consults as a researcher, writer and editor for various non-profit organizations, universities and others, including Mass Insight, MIT's Sloan School of Management, and Arthur D. Little Inc. His work focuses on policy issues. He has also consulted on a range of special projects, including writing this year's detailed report on tax policy for the New Hampshire Commission on Education Funding. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Monthly*, *The Nation*, *Boston* magazine, *The Boston Globe*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and many other publications. His career has included eight years as a business writer at the *Boston Herald* and extensive time as a reporter for *The Mountain Eagle*, an award-winning weekly in eastern Kentucky. He was also an individual grantee of the Ford Foundation, for which he wrote a series of articles about the effects of large-scale energy development on communities in the U.S. west. Primack has served as a policy adviser to elected officials, including former U.S. Representative Joseph P. Kennedy II. Primack received his Bachelor of Arts from Tufts University and his Master of Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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## About the Rappaport Institute

The Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston is dedicated to improving the governance of the Boston metropolitan area. The Institute actively engages the region's public and civic leaders, providing five critical resources: people, research, forums, information, and training.

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Alan A. Altshuler, Faculty Director  
Charles C. Euchner, Executive Director  
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Ashley G. Lanfer, Research Associate  
Jean M. Capizzi, Staff Assistant

79 John F. Kennedy Street  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138  
Phone: (617) 495-5091  
FAX: (617) 496-1722  
Email: [rappaport\\_institute@ksg.harvard.edu](mailto:rappaport_institute@ksg.harvard.edu)