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Drive to Steer Graduates to Public Sector

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Scott Galla, a recent graduate from the University of Wisconsin, was the first to arrive -- at 9 a.m. By the time the doors opened more than two hours later, the line was wrapped around the building, nearly two blocks long. Two thousand interns had descended on Washington's Warner Theater to answer a simple call: "Uncle Sam needs you."

The government has joined the talent war, and sent representatives yesterday to a town hall meeting for Washington interns. The goal was to persuade top graduates to throw aside ambitions of high pay in the private sector, and think instead of high power in the public sector.

It is a much-needed recruitment drive.

"The federal workforce is graying at a very fast rate -- nearly half will be eligible to retire in five years, and there is not sufficient interest or knowledge from top talent," said Max Stier, president and chief executive of the Partnership for Public Service, which organized the event.

One necessity is a modern-day inspirational leader, Stier said, such as the one many of today's workers had when they heard President John F. Kennedy say: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Yesterday, they had one: Barack Obama, the charismatic freshman senator from Illinois. There were more young people crammed into the theater to witness Obama talk about the joys of public service than had turned up for singer Ashlee Simpson a few weeks earlier. They jumped to their feet, clapping and yelling, as the Democrat took the stage.

"The possibility for us to engage in the process -- not of perfecting the world, but improving it, pushing that boulder up the hill -- so that at the end of our lifetimes we can look back and say, 'We made a difference,' " Obama said to the audience of 2,000. "I can't imagine a more worthy project. You don't have to be in government to do it, but government is one of the most important vehicles by which you can do it."

In an interview before the event, Obama said the heavy weight of university debt has deterred young people from government jobs because they felt they could not afford to pay back their loans on a public service salary. However, he added, the rewards of a federal job are huge: "At Capitol Hill, 20- or 30-year-olds are making extraordinary decisions about the life of the country and getting leadership experience that would take them another decade to get if they were in the private sector."

For the Partnership for Public Service, the pitch was simple. Stier told the interns why working for the government matters: "Hurricane Katrina is why it matters, the Iraq war is why it matters, health care is why it matters, globalization is why it matters, poverty is why it matters, and the list goes on and on."

Many were already convinced, but they said their friends needed more persuasion. Galla, 23, who has been an intern at the Department of Health and Human Services, said he wants to pursue a government career but that the Wisconsin students he knows are not aware of the options in the public sector, or that they see public service as a pay cut.

Katusia Lundi, from Emory University's School of Law, said she wants to be a lawyer in a government agency, but that debt is an issue. "The main thing that turns people off the government is that they come out with \$120,000 worth of loans to repay," she said. "In a New York or D.C. firm, you could start on \$120,000 to \$135,000; in the government, I think the highest starting pay is \$77,000." Still, Lundi noted that even if the goal were a career in the private sector, a few years inside a government agency could be invaluable.

Others talked about being put off by the red tape of a federal job -- and the idea that talent is not rewarded.

After the speakers finished, Lundi, Galla and the other interns headed to a career fair to hear about job prospects and to get advice on how to land a good government job.

The room was full of people crowded around stalls, which advertised agencies including NASA and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. At some stalls, lines of people strained to hear what was said.

Next to a stand for the Energy Department, Mary Cummings, a program analyst who has worked there a year, told interns why she had chosen to work in the government. "I used to work in nonprofit at a women's shelter," she said. "But I got out because I wanted to impact on a larger number of people, and you can only do that through the federal government."

Nearby, Aileen Del Cid, an intern at the Department of the Army, was distributing a leaflet to encourage others to consider the Army. It read: "Where you will find responsibility, opportunity and stability."

Del Cid, Cummings, Stier, Obama and Tim Russert of NBC News (who moderated the town hall meeting) are all part of the same campaign -- to get the best to dedicate their skills to their country.

Stier said the Partnership for Public Service is working with government agencies to improve their hiring process, and conducting market research at nearly 600 schools to figure out ways to persuade graduates to work for the government.

"Any smart institution would be investing now, because this is the future," Stier said.