

## New Mexico Quarterly

---

Volume 17 | Issue 3

Article 7

---

1947

# College Training and the Federal Service

Vernon G. Sorrell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Sorrell, Vernon G.. "College Training and the Federal Service." *New Mexico Quarterly* 17, 3 (1947). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol17/iss3/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## COLLEGE TRAINING AND THE FEDERAL SERVICE

*Vernon G. Sorrell*

**T**HE IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE TRAINING to the federal service is indicated from several angles. In the first place, improvement in the efficiency of personnel in the federal service under its present scope of activity can best be had by the increased recruitment of college-trained people. In the second place, if the scope of federal activity increases in the future, as seems quite likely after a few years of retrenchment of wartime agencies, the need for adequately trained people will be intensified.

As more and more segments of our economy are "planned" and "managed" from Washington, federal personnel, especially those in the upper administrative and policy determining positions, will require, as never before, imagination, boldness in thinking and action, and ability and willingness to assume responsibility. It is the special province of the colleges to train young people along these lines.

Finally, as a practical matter, the federal government is the largest single employer of college graduates. This fact alone indicates that considerable significance is attached to the relationship between training in colleges and employment in the federal service.

A frank and candid appraisal of working conditions in the federal service leads to the view that "working for the government" is not very attractive to the typical college graduate. There is considerable truth in the opinion that many government workers are paper shufflers and clock watchers, and interested mainly in keeping their efficiency ratings just high enough to secure automatic within-grade salary increases. It is also true that the efficient worker is not always properly rewarded for his good work, and when this occurs he often becomes indifferent and

lazy. For this and other reasons, the ambitious employee frequently develops a feeling of frustration, and either leaves the service or becomes a "bureaucrat" in the worst meaning of the term. Frequently a considerable degree of frustration arises from the inability of the agency concerned to keep a continuous flow of work moving to its personnel, which in turn may be due to lack of a proper policy at the top or even to Congress.

A feeling of frustration in one's job is not confined, of course, to the federal service; nevertheless, it is probably more prevalent in federal employment than in private employment. This point is emphasized as deterring many ambitious young people from working for the government, and is not offset by such favorable conditions of employment as relative security on the job, the forty-hour week, a month's annual vacation, ample sick leave, substantial retirement benefits, and salary scales which seem to be well in line with private employment although there is a ceiling on top federal salaries provided by law. How to provide working conditions so that personnel will be reasonably happy and contented, with ample opportunity and encouragement to manifest creative imagination and ambition, presents many imponderables; and because of the human or personality factors involved, it is not likely that the problem will ever be solved with a direct head-on attack.

The author of this paper has for some time served on a special social science committee to study college-federal service relationships. The committee is made up of college and federal agency representatives in the thirteenth civil service region with headquarters at Denver, Colorado. This committee gathered information by means of a questionnaire from employees in fifteen federal agencies primarily in the social science fields. In all, answers from 1,246 employees were tabulated. The main results of this survey are summarized as follows:

The range of salaries received was from \$1,726 to \$9,975 with the average \$2,638. The average for men was \$3,043.56 and for women \$2,234.

By educational level the data reveal the following:

|                         | All    | Men    | Women  |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Elementary .....        | \$2061 | \$2123 | \$1855 |
| Junior H. S. ....       | 2242   | 2293   | 2155   |
| High School .....       | 2226   | 2328   | 2151   |
| Partial College .....   | 2485   | 2840   | 2240   |
| College Graduates ..... | 3537   | 4044   | 2394   |

These figures indicate that education pays off in dollars and cents, especially with the men. College-trained women receive on the average little more than the non-college trained, which is explained by the large number in the lower grade made up of typists, clerks, stenographers, and the like.

The average entrance salaries by educational levels also show some interesting relationships, as follows:

|                         | All    | Men    | Women  |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Elementary .....        | \$1898 | \$1926 | \$1806 |
| Junior H. S. ....       | 1978   | 2008   | 1916   |
| High School .....       | 1998   | 2038   | 1963   |
| Partial College .....   | 2065   | 2193   | 1980   |
| College Graduates ..... | 2724   | 3025   | 2046   |

Here again is shown the great difference between salaries of men and women at the comparable educational levels.

The survey showed further that of those answering 1.5 per cent had only an elementary education, 3.6 per cent had completed junior high school, 23.2 per cent had completed high school, 48.2 per cent had taken some college work, and 23.4 per cent had at least one college degree. In the latter category no breakdown was made of education beyond the bachelor's degree. A greater percentage of the men were college trained than women—33 per cent as compared to 14.3 per cent.

In another important respect the survey showed that a college education pays off, and that was in the matter of promotion. The college graduate not only entered the service at a higher salary but was promoted much more rapidly than the non-college trained. After twenty-five years of experience, the average salary for the college graduate was \$4,500, while comparable figures for part college and high school were \$3,600 and \$2,900 respectively. Men rose much higher than women in the salary scale. The average top salary for college men was \$4,800, after twenty-five years of service, while the high for women was \$2,800.

Salaries paid by occupational grouping showed some interesting variations. The legal group was the highest, with an average salary of \$4,400, followed in order by business specialists, administrative, information, and personnel. The lowest paid employees were in the groups of operators of office appliances, typists, clerks, and stenographers, which groups were made up largely of women workers.

Some light was thrown on the question of the value of college

training by several questions asking for opinions. In answering the question what college courses were the most valuable to them in their government jobs, 35.35 per cent said courses which specialized in their own field, 9.17 per cent said courses which specialized in another field, 19.25 per cent said general courses, while 36.25 per cent had no opinion. On the question as to which courses were the least valuable, 1.1 per cent said specialized in own field, 11.3 per cent said specialized in another field, 30.98 per cent said general, and 56.60 per cent said no opinion.

As in perhaps most cases of opinion surveys, it is somewhat difficult to point out the significance of these results, if indeed there be much significance. It would appear at first glance that specialized courses should be stressed in college if a government job is desired; yet it is probably true that in many fields of government work the specialized course is only the entering wedge used to get into the service. Once in the service the employee may be promoted or shifted about, so that there may be little connection between his job and specific courses taken.

The high percentage of "no opinion," both in courses of least value and in courses of most value, seems to bear out this thought. If there is truth in this suggested interpretation, then it is not so much the concern of college curricula makers to provide "entering wedges," a procedure which seems to be necessary and quite practical under the prevailing type of examination provided by the Civil Service Commission. The "hook" course, or courses, is very much in evidence in most of the Civil Service entrance examinations. (The general subject of entrance examinations will be treated later in this paper.)

On the question of organized training after the employee entered on his job, the survey showed rather significant results. While only 37 per cent of all employees had received in-service training, 61 per cent indicated a desire for such training (71 per cent men and 51 per cent women). Of the type of courses desired, a predominance of answers indicated courses specialized along the lines of their present work. These results, indicating that federal employees are not getting the organized in-service training that they would like to get, suggest that the agencies could do more along these lines—perhaps in co-operation with the colleges, where proper instruction and facilities can be had.

A final point from the survey is curious and may be somewhat perturbing to certain types of curricula makers. Somewhat over 22 per

cent said that extra-curricular activities were of more value to them in the federal service than academic courses. When it is recognized that all college students do not engage in such activities (and those college graduates covered in the survey no doubt were typical), the 22 per cent is more significant than would appear at first sight. Of those who emphasized the greater value of extra-curricular activities over academic courses, 63 per cent said extra-curricular academic (debating, dramatics, literary, etc.), 13 per cent said social, 12 per cent said physical, 6 per cent said political, and 6 per cent not specified. From this it might appear that colleges should give more encouragement to such activities and especially such things as forensics and dramatics. Even student politics should not be frowned upon too much. These opinions suggest that in college training too much stress can be placed on specialized and technical training to the neglect of—for a better word—personality building, which, presumably, can be accomplished better in extra-curricular activities than in the classrooms.

A companion committee in the physical sciences, composed of representatives of colleges and federal agencies, made similar studies in the field of the physical sciences. A brief summary of their findings should be of interest. This committee found that the colleges were doing an adequate job so far as scientific content of the various courses was concerned, but that deficiencies were apparent in oral and written communications, management matters, and human relations. The agencies generally were found to be deficient in providing orientation to the new recruit. Too often subsequent utilization of the employee was one of narrow specialization without adequate opportunity to develop broad ability, and little encouragement or support was being given to self-development efforts. The committees also found that the recruitment of graduating seniors by the Civil Service was highly inadequate and the employment procedure slow and cumbersome. The physical science committee suggested that for these and other reasons the cream of the crop of college graduates was going into private employment. This latter point was also the general feeling of the social science committee.

The remainder of this paper will deal with various proposals and suggestions relating to college training for the federal service.

1. The first and most important suggestion relates primarily to the recruitment of college-trained people and involves considerable

shift in Civil Service philosophy. Our general thesis on this point is that entrance to the service in the supervisory and administrative jobs should be on the basis of examinations designed to test general ability and aptitudes with a definite program of in-service training after admission. Practically, this would mean that a college graduate, regardless of specialized courses taken, could apply for the examination. Such procedure looks toward a career in the service.

This proposal suggests that basic Civil Service policy as determined by Congress should be modified. The present law states that entrance examinations shall be of a "practical and suitable" character; and the law makes no positive provision for an educational requirement. Whether or not the Civil Service Commission legally could set up a formal education requirement is problematical; its policy and practice has been not to do so. In effect, to be sure, certain federal jobs require a college degree; for example, a legal position must be filled by a "practicing attorney," and a practicing attorney must have passed a state bar examination, which in most states requires a law degree, as a prerequisite. A similar situation prevails with other technical positions such as engineering, pharmacy, medicine, etc.

The one change that seems most desirable is that the entrance examinations for the supervisory and administrative jobs should not be designed to test specific skills and specializations. This apparently must be done under the present law; at least it is done, although what constitutes a "practical and suitable" examination might be interpreted much more broadly than it has been. Probably the Civil Service practices in this regard represent the intent of Congress, hence the desirability of amending the law.

The recruit should be put through a program of training immediately upon his entrance. This is being done at present in many of the agencies, but the over-all program should be further developed and strengthened. It is safe to say that many private firms are doing a much better job of training their new employees than is the federal government. The program of job training might take several forms: (1) The government might set up a general "school" where all recruits would study for six or nine months before entering upon their duties; (2) or each department or agency could have its separate school; (3) or various agencies could enter into alliances with certain universities and colleges, perhaps on a definite contract basis, to train recruits in

that particular agency; for example, a college with a faculty and facilities in anthropology might train the recruits in the Indian Service; or (4) recruits might take courses in nearby universities that would benefit themselves and the Service. This latter is being done now, of course, especially by the colleges in and near Washington, D. C.

It is to be kept in mind that the program outlined just above is meant to be applied to the college graduate recruit in the supervisory and administrative services. It would apply also to the professional and technical service in some degree; and in lesser degree it might apply to the clerical, the skilled and trades, and the unskilled service. The federal service in all its many divisions and jobs should be articulated to the various educational levels of the public schools and universities. We are interested mainly in those federal positions which call for, or should call for, people with the most advanced training our educational system offers, namely, the administrative and the professional and technical services.

It is recognized that the development of a career service offers many difficulties, not the least of which is the changing nature of our overall economic and political policy. Federal agencies come and go, and probably only a relatively few, such as, for example, the State and Treasury departments, offer opportunities for a real career service.

Turning now to what the colleges are doing or should do in training students for a career in the federal service at the level of employment comparable to their level of educational development, it seems that colleges should not take their cue from what the federal agencies want or think they want, but should be guided by what is thought to be the best training for living in the modern world. Higher educational philosophy and policies as developed by the colleges and universities should dominate the type of training for the federal service, rather than the other way around. It is not within the province of this paper to discuss the philosophy and policies of higher education, but whatever these may be they should apply equally to training for public service as well as to other occupations. The liberal arts college should be able to supply the basic training for the administrative jobs as well as many of the professional and technical jobs, while most of the professional and technical positions should be filled by graduates from the professional schools, namely, business administration, law, engineering, pharmacy, and the like. Because of the Civil Service law with its insistence on "practical"



examinations and on practical courses and experience, there has been a dominance of federal agencies over college curricula, which, in order to be reversed, will take a reshifting of federal service policy, and a possible amending of the Civil Service Act.

2. The foregoing discussion relates to the long-range view and to carry out the proposals would entail some fundamental changes in policy. Desirable as changes may be, they do come slowly in government matters, and those who are responsible for college curricula and for the guidance of students should take conditions as they are and as they are likely to be for a number of years to come. With this in mind let us turn to more immediate matters.

Under present practices, jobs available for college-trained people require certain courses or sequences of courses, of a specialized nature and usually coupled with a certain amount of experience along the line of the duties of the particular position to be filled.

It is not unusual for a college graduate to be told there is no place for him in the federal service simply because he has not "majored" in the proper department or has not taken the specific courses required. Graduates of liberal arts colleges are more often handicapped in this respect than graduates of the professional colleges. In the survey previously alluded to in this paper it was found that graduates of colleges of business administration led all other colleges among the 1,250 that answered the inquiry, and most of these were in the upper grades, that is, in the supervisory and administrative positions. Colleges of business administration seem to provide the "hook" courses by which graduates are recruited into a more or less specialized and technical job, after which they may be promoted to a higher grade in the administrative or professional field.

It would seem that if faculties of liberal arts colleges wish to make it possible for their graduates to enter the federal service under present practices and policies, an effort should be made to encourage the student to take a certain amount of applied or vocational subject matter. It has been suggested that the amount should be 10 per cent, or about twenty semester hours in a four-year course. What these twenty hours should be specifically is difficult to say, but additional light should be thrown on the matter from a study, now under way by the social science committee previously mentioned, of examination announcements in the social science field by the Civil Service Commission over the past

ten or fifteen years. Without making any commitment as to what is an "applied course" and what is not, I should like to suggest that such courses as the following are at least good "entering wedges" to the federal service: accounting, statistics, management courses, journalism, and, particularly for women, typing, shorthand, operation of office appliances, etc. These courses apply, to be sure, in the social science fields only.

The usual liberal arts college, of course, offers a major in many or all of its various departments. The requirement of a specific major in college work applies in the case of many federal examinations. The examination for Junior Professional Assistant in November, 1947, listed nine different options, namely, archivist, chemist, economist, geographer, mathematician, metallurgist, physicist, statistician, and textile technologist. A majority of these options have requirements that could be fulfilled by major study in a department of a liberal arts college. Incidentally, the recent Junior Professional Assistant examination is a revival after a lapse of several years. The Civil Service Commission is to be commended on its reinstatement.

In conclusion, the Civil Service Commission, the federal agencies, and the colleges and universities should work co-operatively to improve the federal service. From a long-range point of view, the aim should be to develop more of the career type of employment, and in this program the universities and colleges should hold dominance in the type of training to be given the aspiring careerist. From a short-range point of view, constant and continuous efforts should be made to improve the service under present employment policies and philosophy, and to this end the following are suggestive: The Civil Service Commission should (1) provide regular annual examinations to graduating seniors, (2) encourage internships and student aid programs, (3) provide more definite information on job opportunities, (4) improve and speed up the induction procedure, and (5) assume more definite responsibility for systematic and selective promotional programs. The agencies should encourage good work by (1) improving promotion procedures, (2) encouraging on-the-job and in-service training, (3) insuring a more definite and effective working organization within each agency, and (4) decentralizing functions to field establishments, within the necessary limits.

The colleges and universities should look to their own curricula with a view to giving courses that the Civil Service Commission now requires in its various examinations; and they should, when and where feasible, give courses or series of courses, to employees of the agencies. Lastly, they should give some thought to the educational possibilities of extra-curricular activities.