

GUIDE FOR ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ON SEMESTER OF SERVICE STUDENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAM



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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), as the Federal Government's chief human resources agency, has developed the Semester of Service Student Volunteer Program to create consistent, high-quality pathways between higher education and Federal service.

This government-wide initiative provides educational institutions and Federal agencies with a standardized framework for semester-length student volunteer placements. OPM supports participating agencies with best practices, templates, and technical assistance while your students gain meaningful public service experience.

PARTNERING WITH FEDERAL AGENCIES TO CREATE MEANINGFUL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

The Semester of Service Program connects your students with hands-on public service opportunities at Federal agencies nationwide. Through structured, project-based placements, students gain professional experience while contributing to agency missions at no cost to your institution.

Authorized under Title 5 U.S.C. § 3111 and 5 CFR Part 308, this program provides a standardized framework for academic term-length Federal volunteer service, creating pathways for your students to explore public service careers while helping agencies address critical workforce needs.

WHY PARTNER WITH FEDERAL AGENCIES

- **Expand experiential learning at no cost.** Provide students with vetted, structured placements without the burden of sourcing and managing individual agency partnerships. Federal agencies handle project design, supervision, and compliance.
- **Meet growing demand for public service pathways.** Position your institution as a leader in preparing students for high-impact careers. Federal agencies actively seek early-career talent in technology, policy, research, and mission-critical fields.
- **Strengthen your Federal partnerships.** Build relationships with agencies that value your students' skills and can help students better understand Federal career paths and future application opportunities.
- **Support diverse career exploration.** Give students across all majors, from computer science to public health to communications, access to meaningful Federal work they might not otherwise consider.
- **Simplify administration.** Use OPM's framework, templates, and best practices rather than negotiating individual agreements with each agency. We provide the infrastructure; you provide the students.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

For Students

- 1. Find opportunities.** Students browse Federal volunteer projects through the [USAJOBS Semester of Service job search portal](#) and agency recruitment channels. Projects clearly describe scope, skills needed, time commitment, and learning objectives.
- 2. Apply and get selected.** Students apply directly to agency projects. Federal agencies review applications and select students based on skills, coursework, and project fit.
- 3. Complete placement.** Students work 8-20 hours per week for one academic term (minimum 90 days) on defined projects with clear deliverables, supervision, and mentorship.
- 4. Build skills and connections.** Students gain professional experience, develop technical and workplace skills, and explore Federal career pathways, while potentially earning academic credit.

For Your Institution

- 1. Before placement:**
 - Promote opportunities for students through career services, academic departments, and student communications.
 - Verify student enrollment and academic standing and provide or document the institution's permission for eligible students to participate, as required by the agency.
 - Determine whether placements qualify for academic credit under your policies.
- 2. During placement:**
 - Serve as point of contact for student questions or concerns.
 - Monitor student progress (if awarding credit).
 - Coordinate with agency supervisors as needed.
- 3. After placement:**
 - Collect feedback from students and agencies.
 - Award credit and document learning outcomes (if applicable).
 - Share program outcomes with OPM to help improve future iterations.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY

Students from your institution may participate if they:

- **Enrollment:** Are enrolled not less than half-time in any degree or certificate program and in good academic standing (as you define it).
- **Field of study:** Are pursuing any major, academic discipline, or career/technical program.
- **Institutional Permission:** Participation is subject to the permission of the educational institution in which the student is enrolled.
- **Availability:** Can commit to a 90-day placement during an academic term (fall, spring, or summer).
- **Citizenship:** Are a U.S. Citizen or U.S National studying in the U.S. or abroad. International students on valid visas may participate if they meet applicable immigration, visa, and agency authorities.

Priority Areas (High Agency Demand)

While open to all fields, Federal agencies have particularly strong interest in students studying:

- Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning
- Computer Science and Software Engineering
- Cybersecurity and Information Security
- Data Science and Analytics
- Information Technology

Projects are also available in policy research, environmental science, public health, communications, business administration, and many other fields.

WHAT STUDENTS RECEIVE

- **Professional experience.** Meaningful project work with clear deliverables, regular supervision, and federal mentorship.
- **Skill development.** Hands-on application of academic knowledge in real-world Federal operations.
- **Career exploration.** Exposure to Federal missions, workplace culture, and potential career pathways.
- **Protection and support**
 - Coverage under Federal Tort Claims Act
 - Workers' compensation for service-related injuries
 - Structured onboarding and ongoing supervision
- **Potential academic credit.** If your institution approves (see below).

WHAT STUDENTS DO NOT RECEIVE

This is an **unpaid volunteer program**. Students are not Federal employees and receive:

- No salary, wages, or compensation from Federal agencies.
- No Federal employee benefits (health insurance, retirement, leave).
- No promise or preference for future Federal employment.
- No travel reimbursement (unless separately authorized).

Note: Students may receive scholarships, stipends, or grants from your institution or third parties without affecting their volunteer status.

ACADEMIC CREDIT CONSIDERATIONS

Your institution determines whether and how to award academic credit for volunteer service. To support your assessment, agencies provide:

- **Clear learning objectives:** Projects are designed with educational value, not just operational tasks.
- **Structured supervision:** Regular check-ins, feedback, and mentorship from Federal professionals.
- **Defined deliverables:** Concrete outputs students can include in portfolios or reflect upon.
- **Performance evaluations:** Written assessments from agency supervisors documenting skills demonstrated and outcomes achieved.

Typical credit frameworks:

- **Internship credit:** 3-4 credits for 120-150 hours over one term.
- **Independent study:** Variable credit based on hours and reflection requirements.
- **Capstone project:** Integration with senior thesis or culminating experience.
- **Service-learning:** Course-embedded civic engagement component.

We recommend establishing a streamlined approval process for Federal volunteer placements that meet your experiential learning standards.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS A PARTNER

Student Preparation

- Promote the program through career services, academic advisors, and departmental communications.

- Help students understand the unpaid volunteer nature and lack of employment guarantees.
- Verify enrollment status and academic standing, and provide or document the institution's permission for student participation, when required by the agency.

Academic Oversight (if awarding credit)

- Define credit requirements, grading criteria, and reflection assignments.
- Monitor student progress throughout the placement.
- Collect final evaluations from agency supervisors.
- Ensure placements meet your experiential learning standards.

Partnership Coordination

- Designate an institutional point of contact (career services, experiential learning office, or faculty coordinator).
- Execute partnership agreements or MOUs with participating agencies (template provided).
- Communicate your academic calendar and credit requirements to agency partners.
- Address student concerns or placement issues that arise.

WHAT FEDERAL AGENCIES PROVIDE

- **Clear project design.** Defined scope, deliverables, and learning objectives for each placement.
- **Structured onboarding.** Orientation to agency mission, policies, and project expectations.
- **Regular supervision.** Weekly check-ins, progress reviews, and constructive feedback.
- **Mentorship.** Guidance from Federal professionals in students' fields of interest.
- **Performance documentation.** Written evaluations suitable for academic credit assessment.
- **Compliance management.** Safety training, ethics requirements, and any background check or screening as required by the agency.

GETTING STARTED

Step 1: Assess Fit

Determine if this program aligns with your experiential learning goals and student interests.

Step 2: Designate a Coordinator

Identify a staff member to serve as your primary point of contact (typically in career services, co-op/internship office, or academic affairs).

Step 3: Connect with Agencies

Reach out to Federal agencies your students might be interested in. Many agencies are actively seeking institutional partners.

Step 4: Establish Credit Policies

Define how Federal volunteer service can count toward academic credit at your institution.

Step 5: Promote to Students

Share opportunities through your career center, email lists, academic departments, and student organizations.

TIMELINE AND NEXT STEPS

Now: Review this guide and assess institutional interest.

Rolling: Federal agencies post volunteer projects as they're developed.

Ongoing: Students can apply for fall, spring, or summer term placements depending on agency needs.

Next step: Contact participating agencies directly or reach out to OPM for general program questions.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Is this only for tech students? No. While Federal agencies have high demand for students in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and data science, projects are available across many disciplines including policy, research, communications, public health, environmental science, and more.

Q: Do we need a formal agreement with each agency? It depends on the agency. Some require MOUs or partnership letters; others work on a student-by-student basis. OPM provides template language to streamline this process.

Q: What if a student has a problem during their placement? Your institutional coordinator should contact the agency supervisor first. If unresolved, escalate to the agency's program coordinator. OPM can provide guidance on complex issues.

Q: Can international students participate? International students on valid visas may participate if they meet applicable immigration, visa, and agency authorities. Students should consult with your international student office.

Q: How much staff time does this require? Minimal. Most coordination happens between students and agencies. Your role is primarily promotional, eligibility verification, and credit assessment (if applicable). Expect 2-5 hours per student placement.

Q: Can students do this remotely? Many placements offer remote or hybrid options. Work format depends on agency mission needs and project requirements.

Q: Does this replace our existing internship programs? No. This is an additional pathway, not a replacement. It's particularly valuable for students who can't afford unpaid experiences or who want Federal exposure without relocating.

Q: What about liability and insurance? Students are covered under Federal Tort Claims Act and workers' compensation. Your institution's general liability insurance should already cover student participation in external experiential learning. Consult your risk management office if you have specific concerns.

Q: Will participating students get hired by Federal agencies? Possibly, but there's no guarantee or preference. This is a volunteer program focused on learning and exploration, not a hiring pipeline. That said, students gain valuable experience and connections that may help in future Federal applications.

Q: How is this different from the Pathways Programs? The Pathways Programs are paid Federal positions with potential conversion to permanent employment. Semester of Service is unpaid volunteer service focused on short-term projects and learning. Both are valuable but serve different purposes.

CONTACT AND SUPPORT

General program questions: Email: Pathways@opm.gov

To partner with specific agencies: Contact agencies directly through their volunteer program coordinators. A directory of participating agencies is available on the [USAJOBS Semester of Service job search portal](#).

Resources for institutions:

- Partnership agreement templates
- Sample credit approval frameworks
- Student promotional materials
- Best practices guide

Available by request from Pathways@opm.gov.

ABOUT THE U.S. OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

OPM serves as the chief human resources agency and personnel policy manager for the Federal Government. We provide policy leadership and expertise on Federal workforce issues and support agencies in recruiting, developing, and retaining a skilled and effective workforce. The Semester of Service program reflects our commitment to building pathways between higher education and public service careers.

Let's work together to give your students meaningful public service experiences while strengthening the Federal workforce.