

# STUDENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAM AGENCY IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE



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## BACKGROUND

Federal agencies across the government face persistent challenges in attracting individuals at the early stages of their careers, building critical skills within the workforce, and promoting awareness of career opportunities within public service. In addition to these ongoing issues, agencies need flexible solutions to carry out short-term projects that are essential to advance mission delivery, fostering innovation, and supporting modernization efforts. These projects often do not necessitate the creation of Federal positions but would benefit from the dedicated focus and fresh perspectives brought by emerging talent.

Executive Order 14170<sup>1</sup> and the Administration's Merit Hiring Plan<sup>2</sup> have highlighted the importance of enhancing Federal recruitment processes, promoting skills-based hiring, expanding pathways for early-career talent, and increasing entry-point access to Federal job opportunities. In alignment with these priorities, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has launched the government-wide "Semester of Service" Student Volunteer Program<sup>3</sup>. This initiative serves as a mechanism for agencies to engage student talent in meaningful, project-based assignments that directly support agency missions, while simultaneously creating educational experiences for students to explore and pursue careers in public service.

## SEMESTER OF SERVICE OVERVIEW

The government-wide "Semester of Service" Student Volunteer Program, as authorized under 5 U.S.C §3111<sup>4</sup> and 5 CFR Part 308<sup>5</sup>, enables Federal agencies to engage students in unpaid, project-based assignments of limited duration. These assignments are designed to align with each agency's strategic priorities, offering participants practical experience within Federal operations while supporting the advancement of targeted initiatives. Assignments may include research, analysis, technical support, or participation in community engagement activities.

Agencies maintain comprehensive discretion in structuring their student volunteer programs, allowing them to tailor both assignments and participation requirements to address distinct mission objectives and operational demands. The approach ensures that the Program delivers mutual benefits to both the agency and participating students.

### Strategic Benefits

When implemented effectively, the Program allows agencies to:

- **Advance strategic initiatives:** Fulfill specific projects that support innovation and modernization efforts.
- **Broaden outreach efforts:** Provide access to opportunities for students nationwide, including those beyond major metropolitan regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Executive Order 14170, [Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government](#).

<sup>2</sup> White House Domestic Policy Council & OPM, [Merit Hiring Plan](#).

<sup>3</sup> OPM Memorandum, "[Building the AI Workforce of the Future](#)", December 15, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> See [5 U.S.C. §3111](#).

<sup>5</sup> See [5 CFR Part 308](#).

- **Expand access to early-career opportunities:** Create structured entry points for students from a broad range of academic institutions and fields of study to gain exposure to Federal service.
- **Increase awareness:** Familiarize students with Federal missions and potential career opportunities that may otherwise remain unknown.
- **Cultivate talent pipelines:** Recognize high-potential early-career talent without conferring employment status or hiring preference.

## PURPOSE

This implementation guide equips Federal agencies with the policy framework and practical tools to design, launch, and manage Semester of Service programs under 5 U.S.C §3111 and 5 CFR Part 308. It provides:

- Step-by-step guidance for program setup and administration.
- Best practices for project design and student supervision.
- Templates for partnership agreements and documentation.
- Compliance guardrails to ensure lawful volunteer service.

OPM's role is to facilitate agency implementation by providing this framework, sharing best practices, and offering technical assistance. OPM does not operate a centralized placement or recruitment system. Agencies retain discretion to design programs that align with their mission priorities, operational contexts, and partnership opportunities with educational institutions.

This guide applies to:

- Federal agencies operating approved student volunteer service programs under applicable government-wide or agency-level authorities.
- Agency program offices, supervisors, and volunteer coordinators responsible for program administration and oversight.

Important Limitations:

- This program does not authorize employment, compensation, stipends, or hiring preferences for participating students.
- Volunteer service creates no entitlement to Federal employment.

## DEFINITIONS

**Project-Based Service:** Volunteer service organized around a scoped body of work with clear objectives, outcomes, and deliverables.

**Semester of Service:** A time-limited (minimum 90-days) volunteer experience aligned with an academic term and structured around defined project deliverables.

**Student Volunteer:** An individual enrolled not less than half-time in a trade school, technical or vocational institute, junior college, college, university, or other accredited educational institution who provides unpaid service under an agency program established to provide educational experiences. A student remains classified as such during school breaks of up to five months, provided they intend to continue their studies in the following term.

## PROGRAM PARAMETERS

Federal agencies may host student volunteers for semester-based service provided that:

- Service is performed by a student, with the permission of the institution at which the student is enrolled, as part of an agency program established for the purpose of providing educational experiences for the student.
- Service is voluntary and not compensated by the agency.
- Students are not Federal employees and neither displace paid staff nor staff positions which are a normal part of the agency's workforce.
- Work assignments are educational, mission-aligned, and time-limited.
- No promise or implication of future Federal employment is made.

## PROGRAM DESIGN STANDARDS

Successful and impactful student volunteer programs require clear project design standards, appropriate scoping, clear learning objectives, and maintain the integrity of volunteer roles. The following standards help agencies create meaningful experiences that advance mission priorities while providing educational value to students. Agencies should solicit project proposals from hiring managers twice per year before each cohort begins.

### Project Requirements

All projects should:

- Address legitimate agency needs appropriate for volunteer support.
- Align with student learning objectives and skills development.
- Be designed for completion within a single academic term.
- Include clearly defined deliverables and milestones.
- Support in-person, remote, or hybrid participation based on agency needs.

All projects should not:

- Consist solely of clerical or administrative tasks.
- Involve inherently governmental functions or independent decision-making authority.
- Replicate or replace the duties of Federal employees.

### Time Commitments:

- Student hours: 8–20 hours per week, part-time
- Total duration: Minimum 90-days, align with academic term calendars
- Supervisor time: Plan for recurring check-ins, midpoint review, and final evaluation

### Program Timeline

Agencies should plan for the following implementation timeline:

- **Recruitment and outreach:** 1-2 months before term starts (or ongoing for year-round programs)
- **Application and selection:** 3-4 weeks
- **Onboarding and orientation:** 1-2 weeks

- **Active service period:** 90-120 days (one academic term)
- **Closeout and evaluation:** 1-2 weeks after term end

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Successfully implementing a Semester of Service Program requires coordination among four key groups: your agency, project supervisors, educational institution partners, and student volunteers. Understanding each role ensures smooth program operation and compliance with statutory requirements.

### Agency Responsibilities

As the host agency, you are responsible for:

#### Program Setup

- Obtain and document permission from the educational institution at which the student is enrolled before service begins, through a Memorandum of Understanding or other documented mechanism with clearly defined institutional responsibilities.
- Designate an agency program coordinator to oversee volunteer operations.
- Submit projects to the [USAJOBS Semester of Service job search portal](#) for national visibility using the “Semester of Service” tag for the job opportunity announcement in your Talent Acquisition System (e.g., USA Staffing).
  - See Appendix A for sample job opportunity announcement template language.
  - See Appendix B for information on how to add the “Semester of Service” tag to the job posting.
  - See Appendix C for sample language to use with applicant notifications.
- Publicize opportunities through agency career pages, institutional networks, and other appropriate avenues (optional) with clearly defined expectations.

#### Project Management

- Execute Volunteer Service Agreements with students and partner institutions and ensure that expectations and responsibilities are clearly outlined.
- Designate qualified project supervisors with appropriate time commitment and expertise.
- Ensure compliance with ethics, safety, security, and data protection requirements.
- Maintain accurate records of volunteer service hours and deliverables.

#### Quality Assurance

- Confirm no promises or implications of future employment are communicated.
- Monitor projects to ensure they remain educational and do not replicate employee duties.
- Verify that volunteers do not displace any employees and are not used to staff a position which is a normal part of the agency's workforce.

### Project Supervisor Responsibilities

Supervisors you assign to oversee student volunteers must:

- Define clear project scope, tasks, and deliverables before student arrival.

- Conduct regular check-ins (weekly recommended) to monitor progress.
- Provide mentorship and constructive feedback throughout the project term.
- Complete midpoint progress reviews and final evaluations.
- Assess project completion and document learning outcomes.

Supervisors should plan for 1-2 hours per week per volunteer for check-ins, guidance, and evaluation activities.

### **Educational Institution Responsibilities**

Your partner institutions are responsible for:

- Verifying student eligibility and academic standing before placement and providing the institution's permission for the student to participate.
- Providing pre-placement orientation on professional conduct, ethics, and expectations.
- Integrating volunteer service into academic credit or experiential learning frameworks, if applicable.
- Monitoring student progress throughout the semester.
- Collecting feedback and evaluations from students and agency supervisors.

### **Student Volunteer Responsibilities**

Students participating in your program must:

- Be enrolled not less than half-time in an accredited trade school, technical or vocational institute, junior college, college, university, or other accredited educational institution.
- Understand their service is unpaid and creates no entitlement to Federal employment.
- Recognize they are not Federal employees and receive no employee benefits.
- Commit to the full program term (minimum 90-days).
- Complete assigned project work and meet established deliverables.
- Adhere to agency policies on conduct, ethics, confidentiality, and security.

## **STUDENT ELIGIBILITY AND STATUS**

To participate in the Semester of Service program, students must meet the following criteria and conditions:

- **Age:** Must comply with Federal, State, or local laws governing the employment of minors.
- **Enrollment:** Enrolled not less than half-time in a qualifying educational institution or career or technical education program, and in good academic standing as determined by their institution.
- **Citizenship:** Must be 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.
  - **NOTE:** Agencies should review relevant immigration eligibility and suitability criteria and policies before accepting non-U.S. citizen volunteers.

- **Field of Study:** Open to all fields – including any major, academic discipline, or career or technical programs at qualifying institutions.

Student volunteers are not Federal employees for any purpose other than those specifically provided by law, including workers' compensation for service-related injury and coverage under the Federal Tort Claims Act. Volunteer service is not creditable for leave accrual or other employee benefits and does not confer a service computation date.

Program experience may be in-person, remote, or hybrid (agency-dependent).

## COMPLIANCE AND SAFEGUARDS

Agencies must ensure:

- **No agency compensation:** Student volunteers receive no salary, wages, stipends, or other compensation from the Federal agency. Third-party funding (such as academic scholarships, institutional grants, or private stipends) is permissible when in compliance with applicable ethics rules and does not affect volunteer status.
- **Clear role separation:** Volunteer assignments remain distinct from Federal employee positions and do not displace paid staff and are not used to staff a position which is a normal part of the agency's work force.
- **No employment promises:** No promise, implication, or expectation of future Federal employment is communicated during recruitment, service, or program completion. Volunteers receive no hiring preference.
- **Transparent status:** Volunteer status and the unpaid nature of service are clearly communicated in all recruitment materials, agreements, and throughout the placement period.
- **Ethics compliance:** Volunteers adhere to applicable agency ethics standards, including confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and appropriate use of government resources.
- **Safety and security:** Volunteers complete required safety training, background checks, and comply with agency security protocols.

## EVALUATION AND REPORTING

Effective program evaluation helps agencies assess impact, demonstrate value, and identify opportunities for improvement. Evaluation occurs at two levels: individual project assessment and aggregate program reporting.

### Project-Level Evaluation

At the conclusion of each volunteer placement, agencies should:

Assess Deliverables

- Evaluate the quality and usability of completed project deliverables.
- Document on how deliverables contributed to agency mission or operational needs.
- Identify any follow-on work or implementation steps resulting from the project.

## Measure Learning Outcomes

- Collect supervisor assessments of student skill development and performance.
- Gather student feedback on learning objectives achieved and experience quality.
- Document specific competencies or technical skills demonstrated.

## Evaluate Program Value

1. Assess the project's contribution to the agency's mission and priorities.
2. Identify cost savings or efficiency gains from volunteer contributions.
3. Determine whether the project model is repeatable for future terms.

## **Agency Reporting Requirements**

Semester of Service program data will be incorporated into your agency's Quarterly Staffing Plan reporting requirements submitted to OPM.

Agencies must track and report the following metrics:

### Participant Information

- Total number of student volunteers by fiscal year and quarter.
- Official duty location of each participant (city, state, agency facility).
- Student demographic information (if collected): institution name, degree level, field of study.

### Project Information

- Total number of projects initiated, in progress, and completed each quarter.
- Project categories or mission areas (e.g., IT/cybersecurity, data analysis, policy research).
- Average project duration and total volunteer hours per project.

### Outcomes and Impact

- Number of projects resulting in usable deliverables or implemented recommendations.
- Volunteer hours contributed (aggregate and by project).
- Estimated value of volunteer contributions (optional but encouraged).

### Reporting Timeline

- Quarterly submissions: Due 30 days after each quarter end (Oct 30, Jan 30, Apr 30, Jul 30).
- Annual summary: Submitted with Q4 report, including trends and year-over-year comparisons.
- Reporting method: Through existing Staffing Plan submission process.

## **Appendix A: Job Opportunity Announcement Guidance and Sample Language**

Agencies are encouraged to post their Semester of Service opportunities on the [USAJOBS Semester of Service job search portal](#) by creating the vacancy using their Talent Acquisition System (e.g., USA Staffing) and using the tag, “Semester of Service.”

Agencies are also encouraged to create a template for Semester of Service job postings to ensure consistency and save time for agency users. Below is sample language that can be used to create templates.

### **Announcement Title**

Because Semester of Service participants will not have an official job title, use the job title space in the job announcement for the name of the project. Use plain language (no acronyms or Federal jargon) and be concise (use one or two words to describe the project).

Examples of good project descriptions include: Website Modernization, Database Creation, Cyber Audit, Artificial Intelligence Modeling, Platform Enhancements, Data Integration, Strategic Communications, Program Evaluation.

### **Summary**

Make an impact while you learn. The Semester of Service Program offers students a volunteer project-based opportunity to support real Federal missions, gaining hands-on experience and valuable career-ready skills. Students must be enrolled not less than half-time in an accredited trade school, technical or vocational institute, junior college, college, university, or other accredited educational institution, and participation must be with the permission of the institution at which the student is enrolled.

With this project, you’ll support a [Insert one word to describe the mission critical area. Examples may include: tech, data, STEM, information technology, artificial intelligence, communications, design.] -based project.

### **This Job Is Open To**

“Students” hiring path.

### **Duties**

[Using bullets, describe the purpose of the project and the work the student will do to help complete the project.]

### **Requirements**

#### **Conditions of employment**

To participate in this Program, you must:

- Must be 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.

- Be enrolled not less than half-time in an accredited trade school, technical or vocational institute, junior college, college, university, or other accredited educational institution.
- Be in good academic standing as defined by your institution.
- Commit to volunteering 8 – 20 hours per week for a minimum of 90 days.
- Complete all required onboarding documentation assigned by the Federal agency and your academic institution.
- Agree to volunteer. This position is unpaid. No compensation, stipends, or hiring preference will be granted from this work. You may use this volunteer experience to qualify for future jobs you choose to apply for.
- Agree to understanding volunteers are not Federal employees.

## **Qualifications**

Applicants will be considered based on their knowledge, skills or abilities related to project needs. Specifically, applicants should:

[Insert bullets on specific knowledge, skills or abilities needed to be successful in completing project activities.]

## **Education**

To qualify, you must be enrolled not less than half-time in an accredited trade school, technical or vocational institute, junior college, college, university, or other accredited educational institution. You also must be in good academic standing as defined by your institution. Attach a copy of your transcripts to your application package for verification.

## **Benefits**

This is an unpaid volunteer experience. Student volunteers are not considered Federal employees for any purpose other than injury compensation and laws related to the Federal Tort Claims Act, and service is not creditable for leave accrual or other employee benefits.

## **How You Will Be Evaluated**

[Describe any assessment and evaluation strategies.]

## **Required Documents**

To apply for this position, you must submit a complete Application Package which includes:

1. Your resume (two or fewer pages) showing:
  - Your work experience to include start and end dates.
  - Education information, such as the name of your school and dates of attendance.
  - Any knowledge, skills or abilities you've gained through education that relate to the project.
2. Proof of current enrollment not less than half-time in a trade school, technical or vocational institute, junior college, college, university, or other accredited educational institution.

## **How to Apply**

To apply for this position, you must complete the online application and submit the documentation specified in the Required Documents section below. A complete application package must be submitted by 11:59 PM (EST) on the closing date of the announcement to receive consideration.

- To begin, click Apply to access the online application. You will need to be logged into your USAJOBS account to apply. If you do not have a USAJOBS account, you will need to create one before beginning the application.
- Follow the prompts to select your résumé and/or other supporting documents to be included with your application package. You will have the opportunity to upload additional documents to include in your application before it is submitted. Your uploaded documents may take several hours to clear the virus scan process.
- After acknowledging you have reviewed your application package, complete the Include Personal Information section as you deem appropriate and click to continue with the application process.
- You will be taken to the online application which you must complete to apply for the position. Complete the online application, verify the required documentation is included with your application package, and submit the application.

To verify the status of your application, log into your USAJOBS account (<https://www.usajobs.gov/>), all your applications will appear on the Welcome screen. The Application Status will appear along with the date your application was last updated.

For information on what each Application Status means, visit: <https://help.usajobs.gov/how-to/application/status>.

## **Next Steps**

Once your online application is submitted you will receive a confirmation notification by email. Your application will be evaluated by the Human Resources Office to determine your eligibility for the position.

After the evaluation is complete, you will receive another notification regarding the status of your application

## Appendix B: Add the “Semester of Service” Tag to the Job Posting

Agencies are encouraged to post their Semester of Service project opportunities on the [USAJOBS Semester of Service job search portal](#) by creating the vacancy using their Talent Acquisition System and using the tag, “Semester of Service.”

This screenshot provides an example of how to find the “Semester of Service” tag in USA Staffing.

The screenshot displays the USA Staffing 'CREATE REQUEST' interface. The top navigation bar includes 'Staffing', 'Classification', 'Recruit', 'Admin', 'Reports', and 'Advanced Search'. The user is logged in as 'Robyn Bachmann - TEST'. The main form is titled 'CREATE REQUEST' and shows the following details:

- Request Number: 20260216-95201
- Customer: USA Staffing Demo Customer
- Request Type: New Vacancy
- Requester: Robyn Bachmann
- Request Process Owner: Robyn Bachmann

The 'Request Information' section includes a 'Generate' button. The 'Position Descriptions' section has a table with columns for 'Position Description #', 'Position Title', 'Pay Plan', and 'Series'. A dropdown menu for 'Request Tags' is open, showing a list of tags including 'NatSec', 'Personnel Vetting', 'Prevention Workforce', 'Privacy', 'Program/Project Management', 'Semester of Service (MCO)', 'STEM', 'Tax Reform', 'TechToGov', and 'Trainer'. The 'Semester of Service (MCO)' tag is highlighted.

Position Description #	Position Title	Pay Plan	Series
<input type="checkbox"/>		GS	- Select a Series.

Other Talent Acquisition Systems, such as Monster Government Solutions, should also have the “Semester of Service” tag available.

## Appendix C: Sample Applicant Notification Language for Agency Administrators

Agency Office Administrators are encouraged to review existing applicant notification templates to ensure they align with the Semester of Service Program before use.

If desired, agencies can create their own notification templates in the Talent Acquisition System for students. An example of language is included below:

### Touchpoint #1: Application Received

Dear [Insert Applicant's First Name and Last Name],

Thank you for your interest in our Semester of Service Program posted under announcement, [Insert Announcement Number]. We appreciate your time and interest in this project.

What happens next?

- We will review all applications once the posting closes. The review may take up to a week to review each of the prospective participants.
- If your information is forwarded to the agency manager of this project, [Insert how they will be notified and next steps].
- If you have questions about this position, please contact [Insert External Contact Information].

Thank you for your interest in Federal employment with [Insert Agency Name].

Please do not respond to this email message. It is automatically generated.

### Additional Touchpoint Notifications

Your agency may decide to perform additional touchpoint notifications from within or outside of the Talent Acquisition System. Please check with your agency to determine which alternative will be used.