

## Paying and Protecting Government Interns Would Help Us All

[Less than 7%](#) of the federal workforce is under 30 years old— a looming issue as older workers retire and governments struggle to recruit and retain young talent. This should be surprising, since many young people are attracted to work that serves the public good, with [a quarter](#) of students indicating government among their top three target industries. Instead of leveraging internship programs as a pipeline for talent recruitment in public service, our current laws and practices keep students vulnerable to toxic or exploitative conditions, driving out many competent and passionate workers before they even get their first job out of college.

*Why is it this way? Pay.*

It's difficult to precisely estimate what percentage of internships across all levels of governments are unpaid, but a 2010 analysis pinned it at around [half](#). Paid internships in federal agencies dropped from [60,000 in 2010 to just 4,000 in 2020](#), though notably in recent years the Biden [White House](#), [Congress](#), and executive [departments and agencies](#) have committed to expanding paid opportunities. Many positions in state and local legislatures, executive offices, and agencies remain unpaid. The lack of compensation for interns isn't necessarily malicious—most offices would probably like to see their interns paid, but not enough to overcome funding constraints and the increased administrative burden of offering paid positions.

Governmental offices' operational budgets are sometimes a fixed pool of money that technically pits intern compensation against other operating expenses, even if funding for internships is budgeted: For example, Senate offices receive [a yearly allowance](#) to operate, such that each dollar that's paid to interns is potentially a dollar away from other full-time paid staff, member travel to their district, and office supplies. Given the glamorous nature of these kinds of political internships, there's typically no shortage of students who are willing and able to work for free. Access to free labor may be too tempting for budget-strapped offices to not supply unpaid positions, and their perceived value means students will continue to fill them.

Funding aside, there are other administrative incentives to retain volunteers over paid interns. Paid positions in governments typically must be filled through a rigorous and arguably burdensome formal hiring process, compared to volunteers whose recruitment process is practically unrestricted. On top of that, converting positions from volunteer to paid would attract even more applications needing review. For example, an office that advertises paid positions must then absorb a non-trivial administrative burden arising from application congestion.

Given recent criticism of unpaid internships, some government employers have begun requiring their interns to receive academic credit or external funding. Let's remember, though, that credit on a transcript can't pay rent or buy food for the duration of the internship. In fact, since students typically pay tuition for any received academic credit, this arrangement effectively means that students are *paying to work*.

Expecting students to find their own funding through university stipends also disadvantages students from less-resourced universities— considering [~65%](#) of institutions *don't* offer stipends for low- or unpaid internships as of 2022. In fact, some government offices don't even publicly post their internship positions online because they have such close connections to certain

university programs. For instance, the California Governor's office, as well as many state department and legislative offices, primarily fill their positions via referral by the [UC Sacramento Program](#) (while the California State University and California Community College systems don't have analogous programs); similarly, many Massachusetts legislative and executive offices are conveniently filled through [Northeastern University's co-op](#) students. These kinds of programs undoubtedly sharpen the resumes for students with access to them. But governments not filling career-launching positions through open-markets introduce inequalities into the public service pipeline, as many qualified candidates aren't privy to such opportunities.

*Why is it this way? Working Conditions.*

To add insult to injury for unpaid interns, there's often little incentive to provide fulfilling work that builds professional skills— milking talent, instead of investing in it. Culturally, many offices, especially those subject to elections that can turnover entire workforces, usually have no intention to retain their interns: Less than [20%](#) of federal interns report receiving a job offer from the agency they worked for. With this mindset, governmental employers sometimes squander a prime opportunity to invest in substantive training for the long-term, focusing instead on taking advantage of free labor in the short-term.

Unpaid interns often do work that otherwise would be done by paid employees. Federal law mandates that companies can only offer unpaid positions if students benefit from the position more than them. While courts use [the Primary Beneficiary Test](#) to determine if an intern at a for-profit employer is receiving enough educational value to be exempt from wages, government interns do not have these anti-exploitation protections.

(Let's also not forget [federal protections against discrimination and workplace harassment don't apply to unpaid interns nor volunteers.](#))

As such, they often do mundane clerical work that supports the basic functioning of government offices, but usually lack the educational component that unpaid internships are supposed to provide. In contrast, paid interns are usually given more fulfilling work— spending [44% of their time on professional, skill-building duties \(33% for unpaid interns\) and 24% on clerical duties \(31% for unpaid interns\).](#)

Again, these situations aren't malicious— many of these offices are short-staffed and run on antiquated systems that make operations inefficient and labor-intense. Despite the potential of interns completing legitimately useful work, staff usually don't have time to provide mentorship that would be needed for assigning substantive tasks. Additionally, most staff are hesitant to trust unpaid interns, given the positions' temporary nature. As a result, interns are usually given the low-level work: After all, it's much managerially easier to assign an unpaid intern to manually file paperwork, sort emails, send calendar invites, and organize folders 8 hours per day than capacity-build them to be ready to enter policy making spaces.

*The Bigger Picture*

However, bandaging operational inefficiencies with unpaid labor has downsides for government employers too. Work that interns are unable to finish typically gets offloaded to full-time staff, saddling valuable manpower with less productive work. Further, not providing dignifying and

rich work to interns both muddies offices' ability to identify star candidates for full-time employment, and dampens young workers' enthusiasm to continue their employment in public service.

The prevalence of these nepotistic and exploitative distortions in early-career public service may have much broader impacts on society. Without worker protections or bargaining power, unpaid interns are in a fragile position, forgoing wages hoping that it will give them valuable experience and connections. Political networks are small, so students subjected to hostile or exploitative work environments may not push back fearing possible future career retaliation.

By only offering unpaid and unprotected positions, many governmental offices forfeit a prime opportunity to better attract, identify, and retain the nation's top young talent. Automating repetitive tasks and paying interns competitive wages to take on more skill-building projects could help offset this issue. Young workers in governmental offices could engage with communities, inform policy, or streamline operations; in fact, they may possibly even alleviate the workload of full-time staff, which could reduce turnover rates that often haunt these offices. (The Texas state auditor's office found a [46% turnover rate](#), twice the State's average, for all state government employees under age 30 for FY2021.)

We must revisit student workers' relationship with public service to build a fairer and more efficient system of internships— one that would attract then retain passion and talent to do social good, rather than repel it. As it currently stands, we have a system that has young passionate would-be public servants entering jobs unrelated to their actual interests and skills—inefficiencies in job-matching that add up to a huge loss for society.

At its core, though, the fundamental issue is even simpler: If an organization removes all unpaid interns and its basic functions are significantly disrupted, then it relies on unpaid labor—a system the United States should unequivocally reject. Anything less than adequate income for their labor is exploiting young workers under the guise of offering experience.

Workers need to be compensated fairly for their labor, and the warm-fuzzy feelings of doing social good and the dubious assurance of future opportunities should not be weaponized to discount current wages or working conditions. As destabilizing political and economic issues continue to amass, governments should be doing everything they can to recruit and train young problem-solvers. Expanding anti-exploitation protections to interns and paying them might be a good start.