IS THE U.S. PUBLIC SERVICE ACADEMY A GOOD IDEA? TWO VIEWS

The Case for a U.S Public Service Academy

Chris Myers Asch
U.S. Public Service Academy
asch@uspublicserviceacademy.org

and

How Not to Fix the Civil Service

Philip I. Levy
American Enterprise Institute
philip.levy@aei.org

AEI Future of American Education Project

Working Paper 2008-01

This paper is available online at www.aei.org/futureofeducation.

Foreword

The idea of creating a national university is not new. More than two centuries ago, George Washington, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson advocated for a national university. In 1797, the American Philosophical Society hosted a contest for proposals on the best system of education for the new nation. Winner Henry Knox proposed a national university, which he argued "would thus constitute the fountainhead of science, that…would diffuse the rays of knowledge and science to the remotest situations of the United government." In 1897, Congress considered the creation of a "University of the United States." Thus far, policymakers have opted not to act on these proposals.

Today—energized by concerns about the performance of civil servants and the need to recruit a new generation of talent into key federal, state, and municipal positions—a new proposal to launch a U.S. Public Service Academy has drawn much attention. Sponsored by Representative James Moran (D-VA) and ninety-four cosponsors in the House of Representatives and by Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and eighteen cosponsors in the Senate, the proposal for a federally funded Academy is modeled on the existing military academies and would offer students a free four-year college education in return for five years of public service.

In truth, the American Enterprise Institute neither advocates for legislation nor takes institutional positions on policy matters, and I myself have mixed feelings on this proposal. While I am sympathetic to the aim, I am inclined toward skepticism of large new federal initiatives. In this light, I am pleased to share with you two thoughtful essays by Chris Myers Asch, a cofounder of the Academy, and Philip Levy, a resident scholar at AEI and one of the Academy's skeptics. Asch's essay, "The Case for a U.S. Public Service Academy," makes the case for the Academy by addressing seven critiques that are commonly raised against the idea. Levy's "How Not to Fix the Civil Service" raises broad questions about the value and feasibility of tackling the public service challenge by launching a new institution.

These two essays constitute less of a debate than two provocative looks at an ambitious policy proposal. I hope that you find them as edifying and thought-provoking as I have. For additional information on these papers or any of the activities of AEI's education policy program, please visit www.aei.org/hess or contact Ms. Juliet Squire at jsquire@aei.org.

—Frederick M. Hess
Director of Education Policy Studies
American Enterprise Institute

The Case for a U.S. Public Service Academy

Chris Myers Asch
U.S. Public Service Academy
asch@uspublicserviceacademy.org

"Much as the challenges of the nineteenth century led to the creation of West Point and the Naval Academy, and those of the twentieth to the Air Force Academy, the challenges of the twenty-first point to a new paradigm in leader development: the Public Service Academy."

Lt. Gen. Dave Palmer (U.S. Army, ret.)
Former Superintendent
U.S. Military Academy at West Point, 1986-1991

The origin of the U.S. Public Service Academy can be traced to George Washington's vision of a national university located in the nation's capital. Washington and supporters such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison believed that such a university could develop national leadership, set a standard for academic excellence, and help bind the nation together. Today, this ambitious idea—embodied in the proposed Public Service Academy Act—has won the bipartisan backing of eighteen cosponsors in the Senate and ninety-four in the House, as well as endorsements from numerous organizations, college presidents, and prominent public figures.

The proposed Public Service Academy will serve as a civilian counterpart to the five military service academies: a federally subsidized, four-year college education in exchange for five years of mandatory service following graduation. Like applicants to the military academies, prospective Academy students first will need to secure nominations from their congressional representative or senator, and then apply through a competitive process for a spot among 1,300 incoming freshmen. The Academy will offer an academically rigorous liberal arts program focused on service and leadership, with a core curriculum emphasizing civic education, service-learning, and international education, along with challenging requirements for study abroad, public service internships, and summer leadership development. Supporters believe that the combination of rigorous academic work with intense, hands-on learning experiences in a unique campus culture centered on public service will develop the character, intellect, and leadership skills students need to serve the American people honorably and effectively.

After graduating from the Academy, students will work for five years in a public institution at the local, state, or federal level. The Academy will partner with state and local governments, federal agencies, and other qualifying public entities to identify critically needed positions for Academy graduates. The Academy will assign graduates to appropriate positions after assessing

national and community needs, student experience, and student academic performance, and graduates will be required to go where assigned. Partnering entities will agree to pay salaries and benefits and to provide professional development opportunities that place graduates on the fast track to leadership.

The Academy will be governed by a Superintendent and a Board of Visitors. The President, with the advice and consent of the Senate, will appoint the Superintendent of the Academy for a six year term. Like the military academies, a supervisory Board of Visitors will oversee the Academy, inquire into the effectiveness of its operations, and preserve its academic freedom.

The Public Service Academy Act calls for the Academy to be funded by a public-private partnership, with the federal government appropriating $164 million (80 percent) and the Academy raising $41 million (20 percent) from private sources. During the early years of the college, the bulk of annual funding will cover start-up costs associated with the construction and/or renovation of essential facilities, including classroom buildings, dormitories, administrative offices, food service buildings, and recreation areas. As more students matriculate, an increasing percentage of funding will be directed toward ongoing costs for instruction and student life, including salaries and benefits, support services, and equipment (see figures 1 and 2). The bill places the Academy within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Placing the Academy within DHS sends an important symbolic message about the national mission of the institution and places it on par with the Coast Guard Academy, which also is located within DHS. The Academy will be housed at a location to be determined by a future Act of Congress. Depending upon the ultimate location of the college, the start-up costs may vary significantly and may require an additional, one-time congressional appropriation targeted for construction and renovation.

Though the size of the annual federal appropriation will be significant, the Academy will benefit from existing programs within government to help defray some of the costs. For instance, following the model of the Presidential Management Fellows program (PMF), the Academy will explore the potential of using fees from federal and state agencies in which graduates are placed to supplement congressional appropriations.

Figure 1

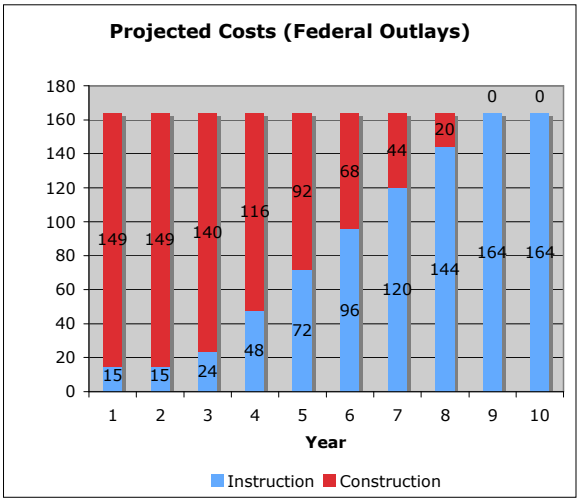
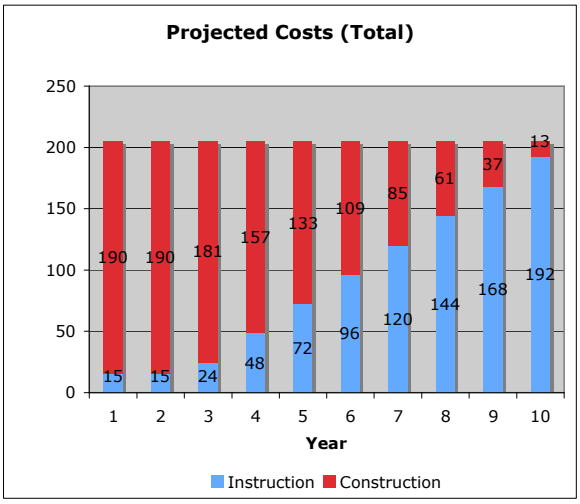


Figure 2



In addition, the Academy will also work to secure experienced federal employees to serve as faculty members through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act mobility program (IPA). Through IPA, the federal government may assign skilled personnel to an institution of higher learning for up to four years (a two year initial assignment with the potential for renewal) in order to promote "a sound public purpose" and to "further the goals and objectives of the participating organizations." Federal employees assigned to serve as one of the Academy faculty members could do so without losing their rights or benefits. As faculty salaries are one of the largest expenses of a college, this arrangement will allow the Academy to share the expense with the federal agency making the assignment and thus reduce overall faculty costs.

Skeptics have raised a number of concerns about the wisdom, costs, and feasibility of the Academy. What follows are seven critiques of the proposal, followed by responses from the idea's supporters.

1. ***We do not need a Public Service Academy because we already have "public service academies" all over the country.*** **American higher education is the envy of the world, with more than 3,000 colleges and universities that do an excellent job of preparing the next generation of public service leaders. According to the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), there are at least 150 undergraduate and graduate programs in public service, public administration, and public affairs. These existing programs have the faculty, facilities, and experience to provide all that the Public Service Academy proposes. A federally funded national Academy is not needed.**

American higher education does indeed boast outstanding colleges and universities, many of which have instituted excellent public service programs that play a vital role in the development of talented civilian leaders. Despite the existence of such programs, however, our country faces critical and growing shortages within our public institutions. The Partnership for Public Service warns of a "federal brain drain," pointing to the 44 percent of federal workers who will become eligible to retire over the next five years.[1] The Department of Homeland Security reports that up to 45 percent of the workforce in some state public health agencies is currently eligible to retire.[2] In public school districts across the nation, particularly in inner-city and rural areas, teacher shortages have cropped up in nearly half of all subject fields, including math, science, and bilingual education.[3] More than 80 percent of the nation's 17,000 law enforcement agencies report that they cannot fill needed positions due to a lack of qualified candidates.[4] In a well noted matter, a congressional report concluded that personnel shortages were "perhaps [the] most difficult challenge" for the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

At the same time that demand is increasing, students are finding public sector service less attractive—even students who are interested in public affairs. One recent study by *The Financial*

---

[1] Partnership for Public Service, "Federal Brain Drain," Issue Brief 05-08, November 21, 2005, available at http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=38 (accessed April 8, 2008).
[2] Stephen Barr, "Staffing Shortages Loom Large in Report on Woeful Response to Katrina," *Washington Post,* February 16, 2006, B2; Elizabeth Warren, Sandy Baum, and Ganesh Sitaraman, "Service Pays: Creating Opportunities by Linking College with Public Service," *Harvard Law and Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (2007): 133.
[3] National Center for Education Statistics, *The Baby Boom Echo Report* (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Statistics,1998). American Association for Employment in Education, "Educator Supply and Demand in the United States," 2005, p. 1, available at http://www.aaee.org/pdf/2005execsummaryfinal.pdf (accessed April 8, 2008).
[4] John Pomfret, "Police Finding It Hard to Fill Jobs: Forces Use Perks And Alter Standards," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2006, A1.

Times found that while 73 percent of graduates from Columbia's School of Public Affairs entered the public sector upon graduation in 1979, only 36 percent do so today.[5] A 2007 NASPAA survey found that even among graduate students in public administration, the *nonprofit* sector was a more attractive career choice than the *public* sector.[6]

The decreasing interest in public service careers (as opposed to a year or two of service after college) stems in part from the cost of college, which can prohibit students from pursuing public sector opportunities after graduation. According to the Project on Student Debt, the average student borrower now owes about $20,000 (or more, for graduates of private colleges), a debt load that discourages students from pursuing less-lucrative public service positions.[7] "The prospect of burdensome debt likely deters skilled and dedicated college graduates from entering and staying in important careers, educating our kids, and helping our country's most vulnerable populations," noted a 2006 report by the Public Interest Research Group.[8]

The unwillingness of students to commit to the public sector also can be attributed to a popular culture that values individual achievement and material gain while belittling public servants. An increasing number of young people are choosing the private sector over the public sector—the percentage of federal workers under the age of thirty (15 percent) is half that of the private sector (30 percent).[9] Once considered an honorable career choice, public sector work no longer commands as much respect from students. "Government work ought to be a respected source of pride," noted the National Commission on the Public Service in 2003. "All too frequently it is not."[10] "Students don't see the government as a place you can make a difference," says Anne-Marie Slaughter of Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs. "The common perception is that if you go into the private sector, you're an economic entrepreneur, if

---

[5] Rebecca Knight, "Concern Grows Over Brain Drain Threat to US Public Sector," *Financial Times,* February 5, 2007.
[6] National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, "MPA/MPP Student Survey," March 2007, available at http://www.naspaa.org/students/surveys/Student3.07_Result.htm (accessed April 8, 2008).
[7] Project on Student Debt, "Quick Facts About Student Debt," May 4, 2007, available at http://projectonstudentdebt.org/pub_view.php?idx=125 (accessed April 8, 2008).
[8] Ledyard King, "Debt Could Worsen Teacher Shortage," *USA Today*, April 5, 2006.
[9] Partnership for Public Service, *Where the Jobs Are: Mission Critical Opportunities for America*, 2nd edition, July 3, 2007, available at http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=118 (accessed April 8, 2008), p. 4.
[10] National Commission on the Public Service, "Urgent Business for America: Revitalizing the Federal Government for the 21st Century," January 2003, p. iii, available at http://www.brookings.edu/gs/cps/volcker/reportfinal.pdf (accessed April 8, 2008).

you go into the nonprofit sector you're a social entrepreneur, but if you go into government you're a bureaucrat."[11] Existing colleges and universities have not been able to counteract this cultural trend. We must do something bold to attract a new generation of young people to the public sector.

The Academy will address these problems in two ways. First, it will supply 1,300 graduates each year with the training to be effective civilian leaders. The Public Service Academy will be unlike other civilian colleges' public service programs. The majority of existing public service programs, including the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, focus on graduate education. Even those that admit undergraduates, such as the Woodrow Wilson School or the Tisch School of Citizenship at Tufts, do not focus exclusively (or even primarily) on the public sector. "Public service" at such programs is defined broadly to include a host of private, public, nonprofit, and volunteer endeavors, and graduates are under no obligation to commit themselves to service. All of these programs are exceptional and praiseworthy, but the Academy will demand more of its students and have a national, civic mission.

The Academy will not simply be a liberal arts school that happens to be funded by the federal government; it will be a service academy whose sole mission is to develop leaders for civilian public service the way the military academies develop leaders for military service. The Academy will offer a core curriculum that emphasizes civic education (including mandatory courses in American History, American Government, Economics, and Constitutional Law), service learning (which combines direct service in the community with rigorous academic reflection), and international education (including mandatory mastery of a foreign language and required study abroad). In addition to the five year post-graduation service requirement (which has no civilian parallel), the rigors of an Academy education will create a campus culture of service that, like the military academies, will unify graduates with a shared sense of mission that will span across graduating classes and create an invaluable network of people who share knowledge and experiences.

[11] Anne-Marie Slaughter, as quoted in Rebecca Knight, "Concern Grows Over Brain Drain Threat to US Public Sector," *Financial Times,* February 5, 2007.

This culture is perhaps the defining characteristic of the military academies, and it will distinguish the Public Service Academy, as well. As Col. Larry Donnithorne has written in *The West Point Way of Leadership*, "The moment you walk onto the [West Point] campus along New York State's Hudson River, you enter a culture where nothing is valued more highly than sound leadership.…From the very first day, cadets find themselves submerged in a cauldron of experiences, which are frequently complex and fast-paced. At first, there isn't even enough time to think. But *every one of these experiences, every aspect of every day of the cadet's training, is designed to teach leadership.*"[12] Similarly, the Public Service Academy will foster a campus culture that emphasizes civilian leadership development. The campus ethos and daily pace of life will be more akin to a military academy than a typical liberal arts college. Students will follow a structured day of classes—Academy uniforms and class attendance will be mandatory—and they will be required to participate in cultural programs, social events, and service projects throughout their college careers. The result will be a unique campus that produces leaders of character devoted to civilian public service.

Second, the Academy will send a powerful, emblematic message about the importance of public service and inspire a new generation of young people to see civilian service as a noble calling. By making public service a more attractive career choice, the Academy can increase the number of students who attend public service programs at other schools, as well. It will be a flagship institution that can both collaborate with and challenge existing institutions to revolutionize how young people perceive public service in this country.

2. ***A Public Service Academy will not solve the problems of our public sector.*** **The problem is not that people are averse to serving in government; rather, it is that government service is not a competitive alternative to the private sector. Public sector compensation is not competitive with salaries available in the private sector. Moreover, talent often goes unrecognized and unrewarded in government. Opportunities for advancement are limited by rigid recruitment policies that discourage potential applicants and anachronistic promotion policies that value seniority over achievement. If public service is ever to be a career of choice for our best and brightest college graduates, then we must transform**

[12] Larry R. Donnithorne, *The West Point Way of Leadership* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1993), p. 6.

government itself to make public service more rewarding over the long term. Until we do, a Public Service Academy will be useless.

The Public Service Academy will not be a cure-all for every ill of the public sector. It must be regarded as one part of a comprehensive program of government reform. Any serious reform effort certainly must tackle the problems of retention and promotion, and Congress should address pay inequities and student loan forgiveness to help recruit the most promising students to the public sector. But adjusting internal policies alone will not trigger the broad cultural shift needed in the public at large and within the public sector to transform our public institutions. The National Commission on the Public Service, which advocated broad reforms to reinvigorate the public sector, emphasized: "The most important goal of the Commission and the one most difficult to implement was that of changing the public's perception of the public service."[13] The Academy will directly address this perception in two ways.

First, critics who belittle the effect of an Academy underestimate the symbolic importance of creating a permanent, national institution that is woven into the fabric of American life like the military academies. Building the Academy will send a powerful message about the value we place on public service in this country while refusing to build the Academy (while offering *five* military academies) implies that civilian service is somehow less important, less legitimate, or less patriotic than military service. Today's young people have heard that message loud and clear. One recent poll conducted by the Council for Excellence in Government shows that we have moved from the "ask not" generation to a generation "not asked," as nearly three quarters of young people report that they have never been asked to consider a career in the public sector, and only one third of them consider a government career appealing.[14] The Academy will raise the visibility of the public sector, reinvigorate our sense of public service, and offer young people a prestigious opportunity to enter public service.

---

[13] National Commission on the Public Service, *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service* (Washington, DC, 1990, p. xxv.

[14] Peter D. Hart Research Group, "Calling Young People to Government Service: From 'Ask Not…' to 'Not Asked," Council for Excellence in Government, March 2004, p. 7.

Second, the steady infusion of top-quality Academy graduates into the public sector will help transform our public institutions from within. The Academy will be a dynamic institution at which students, scholars, and practitioners in public service will pioneer new approaches to public service and better ways to exercise civilian leadership. As young leaders rise through the ranks of public service, they will bring fresh ideas and a higher standard of excellence to the institutions in which they work. At the same time, the five-year service requirement will give graduates enough time to acquire the experience and expertise needed to make a significant impact within their chosen public service field. This experience and expertise also will serve as an added incentive for them to remain in the public sector for the duration of their careers. Compared to college graduates who serve for only one or two years as part of a national service program (e.g. Teach For America, AmeriCorps), Academy graduates will be more invested in service as a long-term career.

3. *The proposed undergraduate Academy will focus on the wrong students.* Twenty-first century public sector leaders will face complex problems that demand the experience and expertise that accompany a graduate degree. An undergraduate Public Service Academy will produce graduates who are unprepared to meet the critical needs of the public sector. According to the Partnership for Public Service, the vast majority of "mission critical" government jobs that currently suffer from serious shortages require a graduate degree and specialized knowledge. Public Service Academy graduates will possess solely an undergraduate degree, which means they will have limited opportunities and will be clustered in the lowest-ranking positions that are the least challenging and rewarding. Any national Academy aimed at strengthening the public sector should thus focus on graduate training.

This critique overlooks the extraordinary shortages our nation already faces in public sector positions, particularly in education and law enforcement, which do not require a specialized degree. Focusing solely on graduate students belittles the potential import of an undergraduate education. This critique is based on the assumption that a student's undergraduate experience has little effect on whether he or she will be interested in pursuing public service after graduation. Yet college is far more formative in terms of a student's character and career choice than graduate school; by the time students reach the graduate level, they generally have settled on a career path,

and they see graduate studies as a way to advance their careers along that path. Many talented students enter college with dreams of a public service career, but they graduate four years later with different priorities and interests. Had they gone to an academy that offered a service-oriented setting that nurtured and cultivated their service impulses, these students may have pursued public service. Instead, we lose them to other fields that are more appealing in terms of compensation or prestige—and our nation suffers as a result.

Interestingly, young people themselves strongly support an undergraduate Public Service Academy. In a survey of 2007 Coca-Cola Scholars conducted by Academy officials and the Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation, more than half of college-bound high school seniors indicated that they would have applied to the Academy had it been an option; another 30 percent said that they might have applied.[15] A survey conducted by a Truman Scholar from Syracuse University revealed that 90 percent of 2007 Truman Scholars considered the Public Service Academy a "reasonable policy option," and 70 percent would have considered applying to the Academy had it been a possibility when they were applying to college.[16] These young people recognize the potential appeal and value that an undergraduate Academy could offer.

Yet there can be no doubt that the public sector needs employees with the specialized knowledge and experience that often accompany graduate degrees. As an undergraduate institution, the Public Service Academy will not preclude additional efforts to encourage people with graduate degrees to enter the public sector. Moreover, the Academy proposal provides economic incentives for Academy graduates to pursue graduate education. After an initial placement of two years, an Academy graduate will be able to defer the remaining three years of service in order to pursue graduate studies. The Academy will follow the lead of the military academies and subsidize a student's graduate education at a public institution in return for an extended service commitment. For every year of subsidized graduate education, students will be required to add two years to their service commitment. Thus, Academy graduates who pursue a four-year medical degree will be responsible for serving the nation for a total of thirteen years—

[15] U.S. Public Service Academy, "2007 Coca-Cola Scholars' Views on the U.S. Public Service Academy," Survey, April 2007.
[16] Marc Peters, "Survey of 2007 Truman Scholars on the United States Public Service Academy," Syracuse University, 2007, available at http://www.uspublicserviceacademy.org/TrumanSurvey.pdf (accessed April 9, 2008).

the required five years, plus eight additional years. The nation will benefit from service-minded doctors, scientists, lawyers, researchers, administrators, and other highly-trained professionals who spend more than a decade in public service, while Academy graduates will be able to pursue their studies without suffering economic hardship.

4. ***The Public Service Academy's analogy to the military academies is flawed.*** **The two endeavors are entirely different. First, the military academies fulfill a unique role—developing military leaders—that is the sole responsibility of the federal government. The Public Service Academy, by contrast, will target roles that are not the unique province of the federal government. Second, military academy students learn very specific, technical skills that are unavailable at most other schools. The primary emphasis is on military prowess, not academic prowess, so it makes sense for students interested in military leadership to attend an academy even if they could get superior academic instruction from another civilian institution. The skills necessary for civilian leadership, on the other hand, can be taught at existing private and public colleges. Third, when they graduate, cadets enter a particular branch of the military at a standard rank and become part of a structured leadership hierarchy with clear lines of progress. The civilian public sector, by contrast, is far broader and more diffuse. There is no unified sense of what it means to be a public sector leader, and there is no leadership structure into which a Public Service Academy graduate can be placed.**

The nation's five military service academies are extraordinary examples of effective national public education and they offer an apt model for the Public Service Academy to follow in developing its mission, structure, and culture of service. Developing civilian leadership as well as military leadership is indeed an appropriate function of the federal government. As the Preamble to the Constitution states, the federal government has the responsibility not simply to "provide for the common defense," but also to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquility,…promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." The military academies provide federally-subsidized education to future military leaders who will defend our nation, yet we do not have a civilian counterpart devoted to meeting the government's other responsibilities. From local school superintendents and police chiefs to the heads of state and federal agencies,

strong civilian leadership is as essential to our nation's long-term strength as military leadership and the federal government has a role to play in developing it.

The military academies naturally emphasize military and technical skills, but these skills could be and are taught at other institutions, from The Citadel and Virginia Military Institute to the variety of schools that offer ROTC programs. What truly differentiates the academies from civilian colleges is their intense focus on developing students into service-oriented leaders. The academies all share a mission of nurturing leaders who will serve our nation with honor. The Naval Academy, for example, emphasizes that its Officer Development Program is "a four-year integrated continuum that focuses on the attributes of integrity, honor, and mutual respect." At West Point, the Cadet Leadership Development System aims to develop students into Army leaders with "character, presence, and intellect."[17] The military academies foster a unique campus culture of service through an intense program in which various learning experiences—classroom work, extracurricular activities, off-campus enrichment—reinforce the overarching goal of leadership development. These corps-building activities foster unity, develop discipline, and instill an ethic of service that remains with cadets throughout a lifetime of leadership, whether they remain in the military or not.

Entire books (including Larry Donnithorne's *The West Point Way of Leadership*, W. Brad Johnson and Gregory Harper's *Becoming a Leader the Annapolis Way*, and Scott Snair's *West Point Leadership Lessons*) have been written to emphasize that these qualities are not exclusively the province of military leadership. They also are applicable and essential to civilian leadership. When military academy graduates leave the armed forces, they are often highly sought after in the civilian sector, not because they have military or technical skills but because they have been trained in leadership. Like its military counterparts, the Public Service Academy will embrace a mission of developing leaders to serve the nation, it will offer a structured academic program to give students a shared base of knowledge, and it will cultivate a campus ethos that emphasizes service and leadership in all areas of student life.

[17] United States Naval Academy, "About," http://www.usna.edu/about.htm; Department of the Army, "Army Leadership," October 2006, available at http://www.nd.edu/~army/fm6_22.pdf (accessed April 8, 2008).

There are indeed significant differences between the military and the civilian public sector. The nature of leadership in the public sector is more diffuse, and the path to leadership is less clear. That does not mean, however, that civilian leadership cannot be taught. It can be taught, and the recent failures of civilian leadership, particularly in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, reveal that it must be taught. The Public Service Academy will be at the forefront of civilian leadership development, a locus of teaching, scholarship, and practice in a field that is too often overlooked in higher education. The military offers a structured hierarchy into which military academy graduates are placed, and the style of leadership developed within the military academies appropriately is tailored to that context. Similarly, the Public Service Academy will tailor its leadership development programs to fit the needs of the public sector, which demands flexible, adaptive, collaborative, and creative leadership that does not always follow hierarchical models. It will help transform how we conceive of civilian leadership and raise our level of expectation for civilian leaders.

5. ***A Public Service Academy will encourage bigger government.*** **The Academy will expand the reach of the federal government by producing graduates who are ideologically predisposed to see big government as the solution to social problems. The current composition of university campuses suggests that the Public Service Academy will likely be liberal to begin with, and Academy graduates will emerge committed to expanding government power.**

First and foremost, asking more from our government does not require more government. The Academy will not create new jobs for graduates; it will place them in positions where shortages already exist. Academy students will help make our public institutions *better*, not *bigger*. No matter how much we may disagree about the appropriate size of government, Americans of all political stripes want our government and our public institutions to work. As former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Paul Volcker has noted, "For all the glories of Adam Smith, somebody has to set the rules and adjudicate disputes. Somebody has to defend the country and to explore space. Somebody has to keep the air clean and the environment safe for the next generation. Somebody

has to respond to those more mundane, but nonetheless sometimes quite challenging, assignments of keeping government working effectively and efficiently if self government is to work at all."[18]

The Academy will help make our public institutions more effective, efficient, and economical by developing young leaders who embrace a higher standard for public service and a commitment to serve the nation and the Constitution. Having top-quality people working in our public sector ultimately will save the government money. Ideally, the Academy will produce people such as Nicole Faison, an employee at the Department of Housing and Urban Development who helped to develop a new accounting system that saved the federal government more than $2 billion in improper rental assistance payments—the savings from her work alone could pay for the Academy for a decade. Imagine how much taxpayers would save if our government had more people such as Terence Lutes, an Internal Revenue Service employee who developed the eFile system for tax filing, which has cut processing costs by 90 percent. If we want our government to be more effective, then investing in leadership development is money well spent.[19]

Far from being a magnet for left-wing academics, the Academy will likely be a very different kind of college, more like West Point than Wesleyan. The curricular focus on character, civics, and leadership development, along with the extraordinary requirements placed upon students, will differentiate the Academy significantly from other civilian colleges where "service to the nation" is considered somewhat quaint and old-fashioned. The Academy will unabashedly embrace cherished values such as "citizenship," "patriotism," and "duty," which, as former Harvard president Derek Bok has written, "became suspect words on campus" during the 1960s and remain so today.[20] It likely will not attract an overwhelming number of left-wing students or professors, but will appeal instead to the broad, pragmatic center of American politics. It will attract young people who are patriotic and committed to making their country better.

---

[18] Paul Volcker, as quoted in National Commission on the Public Service, *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service* (Washington, DC, 1990, p. 4.

[19] Faison earned a 2007 Service to America Medal (SAM) awarded by the Partnership for Public Service; Lutes earned a 2005 SAM.

[20] Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 179.

Small government conservatives are not alone in their fears that the Academy will produce ideologically undesirable graduates. The clear nationalism of the Academy's mission, the unabashed use of the flag and other national symbols, and the school's emphasis on patriotism, character, and civic virtue have prompted criticism from a number of liberal academics. They express concern that using the military academies as models will produce graduates who are not independent thinkers and who will be more interested in preserving the system than in changing it. They worry that their political opponents will use the Academy to develop a new generation of ideologically rigid conservatives. They fear that the Academy could become a federally-funded version of Patrick Henry College, which explicitly encourages conservative graduates to pursue public service careers. These fears, like those of their conservative counterparts, reveal more about the liberal critics than about the Academy itself. As a national institution, the Academy will indeed have a vital campus culture that emphasizes students' duty to the country—that is part of its appeal and its mission. But it does not follow to assume that this patriotic emphasis will somehow diminish academic standards or produce ideologically rigid graduates. The Academy will provide strict guarantees of academic freedom and will follow the lead of the military academies in maintaining the separation between the politicians in Washington and the day-to-day operation of the institutions.

6. ***A public service scholarship program would be more cost effective than a Public Service Academy.*** **Rather than spending billions of dollars on the construction, maintenance, and other costs associated with a bricks-and-mortar campus, it would be better to offer an ROTC-style scholarship program for students interested in public service. Students would receive scholarship money based on their commitment to serve in the public sector following graduation, and they could use their scholarship money at any school in the country. This kind of federal investment would give students the opportunity to tap into existing resources, rather than wasting money on constructing or renovating facilities.**

Creating a public service scholarship program is a worthy, but limited, idea. It ignores the symbolic importance of creating an institution that can raise the visibility of public service and transform how young people across the country perceive, prepare for, and pursue public service. Boldness matters. To inspire young people, an idea must be bold, exciting—different. As a

prestigious, national institution, the Academy will capture the imagination of a new generation of young people. Once established, the Academy will become the nation's flagship institution for public leadership, a locus of talent that will produce top-quality leaders for future generations. Its impact will grow over time, as alumni rise to positions of authority in public institutions around the country. Like West Point and the military academies, the Public Service Academy will become an integral part of American life, a powerful testimony to the importance of public service to the vitality and success or our nation. Even the most prestigious scholarship programs, such as the Rhodes, Truman, or Fulbright, do not carry the same cultural weight or have the same symbolic importance as the military academies.

Culture matters as well. Disparate scholarships spread among various institutions cannot instill a cohesive culture. Existing institutions have their own set of priorities and procedures; scholarship money would benefit individual students but would neither alter the overarching mission of their institutions nor give students a transformational cohort experience. The military's ROTC program is an effective supplement to its officer training at the academies, but it is precisely that: a supplement, not a substitute. The military academies serve as flagship institutions for leadership development, and they offer an intense culture of service that is difficult to replicate on other campuses. Similarly, the Academy, with its singular focus on service, its rigorous leadership development program, and its tough, five year commitment, will instill a culture of service that will bond students to each other and create a network of lifetime leaders. Having a stand-alone campus is the only way to create a unique, unified campus culture that develops a strong *esprit de corps* around a public service mission. Like cadets at the military academies, Academy students will give up the traditional college life—they will be required to wear uniforms, they will follow a more structured curriculum with a heavy load of required courses with fewer electives, they will be involved in classes and service all year round, and there will be no fraternities or sororities. More than their peers at other civilian colleges, they will be held to a higher standard of conduct suitable for future leaders, role models, and exemplars for the nation. The result? Students gain a more intensive, more focused, more rewarding education, while the nation gains stronger, better trained, more dedicated young leaders required to serve their country for five years.

7. *The Public Service Academy idea is not realistic because long term support in Congress is unreliable.* Building a top-notch, bricks-and-mortar national campus from scratch will take a generation and billions of dollars to construct facilities, recruit the faculty, and develop the vast array of programs expected of an elite institution. There is little likelihood that the Academy will win the bipartisan support in Congress necessary not only to launch the school but also to protect it from future budget cuts.

Building the Academy will indeed be expensive and perhaps daunting. As an investment in future leadership, it cannot be done "on the cheap" (though the Academy budget will represent less than 1 percent of the $23.5 billion that the federal government spends annually on higher education).[21] It will require consistent, bipartisan support in Congress not only to authorize the Academy but also to appropriate tens of millions of dollars annually to the campus. Even with full funding, it will indeed take many years of patient program building to develop the top quality college we envision. Launching the Academy and sustaining support from Congress every year will be difficult, but it is by no means impossible or impractical, any more so than the founding of West Point shortly after the American Revolution or the Air Force Academy in the wake of World War II.

In his seminal work on the founding of West Point, historian Stephen Ambrose highlights the depth of congressional resistance to Thomas Jefferson's plan for a national military college. West Point was by no means inevitable. Many members of Congress considered it un-republican, elitist, and wasteful. Few observers in 1801 would have predicted that West Point would get off the ground let alone continue to thrive more than two hundred years later. Despite vociferous opposition, Jefferson founded the institution and subsequent presidents and their congressional allies have weathered vociferous criticism to nurture it. Their perseverance has been well-rewarded, for today West Point and the other military academies that followed it are among our most well-respected institutions of higher education, and they consistently earn broad, bipartisan support in Congress. Their example bodes well for the Public Service Academy.

---

[21] Adam Carasso, Gillian Reynolds, and C. Eugene Steuerle, "How Much Does the Federal Government Spend to Promote Economic Mobility and For Whom?" Economic Mobility Project, 2007, available at http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411610_Economic_Mobility.pdf (accessed April 8, 2008).

The Academy will promote the bipartisan goal of good government and effective public institutions, a goal that has the overwhelming support of the American people. In fact, a 2003 Gallup poll showed that 94 percent of Americans believed that "honesty in government" was very important to keeping America strong—a higher percentage than for any other answer, including "racial harmony," "widespread belief in God," and "knowledge of history."[22] Meanwhile, in 2007, only 54 percent of Americans had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police, 33 percent had similar levels of confidence in public schools and only 19 percent in the criminal justice system.[23] Thus far, the Academy initiative has earned strong bipartisan support in Congress and outside of it as well. The Public Service Academy Act, introduced in March 2007, is cosponsored by Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) in the Senate and Christopher Shays (R-CT) and James Moran (D-VA) in the House of Representatives. The bills now have eighteen cosponsors in the Senate and ninety-four in the House. The Academy also has earned endorsements from a wide range of public leaders and organizations, from City Year to Catholic Charities, from former Rep. Jim Leach (R-IA) to former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN), from the presidents of Amherst, Stanford, and the University of North Carolina to three former superintendents of West Point. With courageous leaders from both sides of the political aisle, we will create a lasting institution that will stand as a monument to visionary leadership.

Conclusion

The enormity of the Public Service Academy challenge ahead should not cause us to shrink from it. On the contrary, the challenge itself can serve as an inspiration. Americans are a can-do people, a people that embraces big, bold ideas such as the Academy that will make them proud of their country. The Academy will help answer the National Commission on the Public Service's call for "a renewed sense of commitment by all Americans to the highest traditions of public service—to a public service responsive to the political will of the people and also protective of our constitutional values; to a public service able to cope with complexity and conflict and also able to maintain the highest ethical standards; to a public service attractive to the young and talented from

[22] George Gallup, Jr., "Which Principles Keep America Strong?" The Gallup Organization, November 4, 2003, available at http://www.uspublicserviceacademy.org/TrumanSurvey.pdf (accessed April 9, 2008).
[23] Frank Newport, "Americans' Confidence in Congress at All-Time Low," *Gallup News Service*, June 21, 2007, available at http://www.gallup.com/poll/27946/Americans-Confidence-Congress-AllTime-Low.aspx (accessed April 8, 2008).

all parts of our society and also capable of earning the respect of all our citizens. A great nation must demand no less."[24]

It was in that spirit that the Academy initiative was launched in 2006, and at the time few experts gave it any chance to go anywhere, in Congress or in the public at large. Liberals and conservatives alike dismissed its prospects, citing the difficulty of getting such a grand project off the ground in a highly partisan environment. They counseled Academy leaders to think small, to work within existing institutions, to seek an inexpensive solution that could be hidden as an amendment to an omnibus spending bill. Their criticism led Academy supporters to sympathize with *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who, in an essay entitled "A Return to National Greatness," wrote, "What a melancholy thing to compare today's Washington with the Washington in which there was such enthusiasm for grand American projects."[25] For every grand American project—from building West Point to creating a national park system to putting a man on the moon—there have been naysayers and cynics who sought to undermine the effort. In the end, however, we mustered the will to proceed, despite the cost and the hardship, because we were determined to make our children's America better even than the one in which we grew up. It is hard to imagine our country without West Point or the park system or the space program, and a generation from now people will look back and wonder not just *how* but *why* we ever got along without the Public Service Academy.

[24] National Commission on the Public Service, *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service* (Washington, DC, 1990), p. 1.
[25] David Brooks, "A Return to National Greatness: A Manifesto for a Lost Creed," *The Weekly Standard,* March 3, 1997.

How Not to Fix the Civil Service

Philip I. Levy
American Enterprise Institute
philip.levy@aei.org

Introduction

The proposal to launch a U.S. Public Service Academy is motivated by the best of intentions. Public service is failing to attract and retain America's best youth. There are essential tasks that federal, state, and local governments must perform. If key positions are not filled by capable people, the ill effects could redound throughout the economy and the polity.

Even if one is content with the way the civil service has performed to date, there are storm clouds brewing. Roughly 90 percent of senior managers in federal government are eligible to retire within the next decade, and more than 40 percent of all federal employees will be eligible for retirement by 2010.[1] Meanwhile, Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs reports only 36 percent of graduates are going into the public sector compared to 73 percent in 1979.[2]

We can stipulate that there is a problem. But we must ask: Are there too few students with the requisite skills? Is there no way to obtain the necessary training? Is there a lack of civic-mindedness? Is there a lack of interest in public affairs? If any of these were the problem, the Public Service Academy might well be the solution. In fact, the problems lie elsewhere.

This essay concludes that there are readily available ways to achieve the goals of the Academy, more effectively and at a lower cost. For instance, a competitive scholarship program that included a public service obligation could lure some of the brightest students to get a taste of public service. This might not address the problem of retention, but it would be a start. Moreover, it would make use of the American system of higher education, which is one of this country's most globally successful sectors.

[1] Rebecca Knight, "Fears for U.S. Public Sector As People Opt for Jobs Elsewhere," *Financial Times*, February 4, 2007.
[2] Ibid.

Diagnosing the Problem

The central premise behind the Public Service Academy proposal is that there is a short supply of the right kind of entrant into government service. The right kind of person would feel a calling to public service, an interest in the affairs of the day, and a willingness to serve where needed. The claim of scarcity is a criticism of the existing educational system, but it's not for a failure to provide skills. Instead, it's for the failure to instill graduates with the proper public spirit.

It's difficult to think of a good measure of public spirit that is separable from other determinants of joining public service. There seems to be no shortage of interest in pursuing the general topic. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs reports that there are over 150 existing programs for public service, where students can obtain the necessary training for work in government. Top schools such as Harvard's Kennedy School of Government or Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies have acceptance rates of 15 to 25 percent. At the undergraduate level, policy-oriented subjects such as economics, history, and political science are often among the most popular majors. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement reports that, among students who pursue postsecondary education, fully one quarter participate in volunteer activities—indicating that a lack of interest or engagement with the community may not be the issue.

Personal experience teaching at major universities suggests that there is abundant student interest in civic affairs and in shaping public policy. This interest grows as students master the relevant subject matter in their college study. It is often a motivation behind the popular study of law, since many students pursue legal study with little interest in becoming litigators. It is the reason Washington, D.C. is swarming with well-educated interns who are paid little or nothing but are eager to get a taste of the policy world.

If we nonetheless conclude that there *is* a lack of public spirit, we have to ask whether a new institution of higher education would be well situated to restore it. Students would have to possess a fair degree of public spirit to decide to apply to and attend the proposed Academy. Without the high school students' spirit, the Academy would lack applicants. Thus, the scenario in

which the Academy might be useful is one in which ample public spirit in high school somehow dissipates over the college years. With little evidence that existing higher education saps public spirit in this way, however, there is little reason to forsake its other benefits.

So what's causing the problem?

Why, then, do these students not fill the ranks of the civil service? It is difficult to generalize about the multiple levels of government, so we will restrict this discussion to the federal government. First, it is not easy to get a federal job. The hiring process is daunting.[3] Some jobs are classified as "competitive service," where applicants compete against each other in open competition under a merit system set by the Office of Personnel Management. Others are "excepted service," under which agencies set their own qualification requirements.[4] Though listed publicly, the requirements for competitive service jobs can be difficult to decipher for someone outside of the government. Preferences are granted to veterans, who have demonstrated their public spirit through their military service. There can be long, quiet delays between submission of an application and any word of a decision. Meanwhile, finding employment in agencies that use excepted service means mastering different sets of requirements.

Those students who do successfully navigate this process end up in an inflexible world in which seniority is paramount. It's very difficult to advance quickly or be rewarded with challenges commensurate to abilities. The ambitious and talented young entrants are likely to discover, either before or shortly after entering government, that their prospects are substantially brighter in the private sector. In the public sector, good things come to those who wait. These good things include higher pay, vacation time, and positions of responsibility. Managers have little ability to reward especially promising young workers, nor can they readily eliminate or demote older workers who have ceased to function well. This provides welcome job security for federal workers, but it can create inequitable situations in which the best-compensated workers do the least while the youngest, most capable workers must pick up the slack for a fraction of the pay.

---

[3] For one description of the difficulties in federal hiring, see U.S. General Accounting Office, "Human Capital: Opportunities to Improve Executive Agencies' Hiring Processes," May 2003, available at http://www.gao.gov/highlights/d03450high.pdf (accessed April 8, 2008).

[4] USA Jobs, "How Jobs Get Filled," available at http://www.usajobs.gov/infocenter/howjobsgetfilled.asp (accessed April 8, 2008).

The emphasis on seniority provides an even greater deterrent to those who join the federal government after some time in the workforce, as their experience outside government counts for little in calculations of seniority.

This is not to impugn the dedication and abilities of many veteran federal workers, but these capable workers have persisted despite the incentives. A system that provides job security but little reward for youthful energy or initiative tends to prompt the most talented newcomers to depart. The private sector will value their skills more highly. Those who remain will either be those with extraordinary dedication or those with lesser private sector prospects.

One way to think of the retention challenge is to consider the degree of dedication (or public spirit) required to stay in the civil service. From the start, there are pay disparities. For those with legal training, for example, a 2006 study found the nationwide average annual starting salary for entry level civil legal services jobs was $36,000. The same study found that the average starting salary for a first year associate at private law firms was $105,000.[5] According to the American Bar Association, graduating students carry an average of $75,000 in law school debt. It is not hard to conclude that law school graduates, especially those with debt, will be less inclined to enter public service jobs when they can earn nearly three times the salary in the private sector.

This is not to argue for pay equality between the public and private sector. There are certainly non-pecuniary benefits of public service, such as the sense of contribution and the interest of the daily work. But these only go so far. The public sector must compete with a private sector that can offer lavish rewards and great responsibility to the most promising young people. The greater the disparity between the sectors, the more young people will forsake thoughts of public service.

Without a reform of the way government operates, the Academy would do little to remedy these disincentives. With a reform, a costly Academy would likely be unnecessary.

[5] National Association for Law Placement, "Public Sector and Public Interest Attorney Salary Report," (Washington, DC: NALP, 2006).

The Challenge of Setting up a Public Service Academy

Not only would the Academy be a costly solution to an ill-defined problem, it would be dauntingly difficult to establish and operate. Even a well-endowed new private university operating with complete autonomy would find it very difficult to establish a reputation, attract top-notch faculty and students, and establish and maintain a high-quality curriculum across a broad range of topics. To do so as part of the federal hierarchy and with political oversight would compound the challenge.

The Military Model. The explicit model for the Academy is the military service academies. They do a very effective job at providing leaders for one branch of public service—the military. Why not mimic their approach in staffing other parts of the public service? There are good reasons not to. The military services differ from the civil service in some important ways. Their central purpose is to mold an officer corps. While MIT or Caltech likely produce better engineers, engineering skill is secondary in the military to prowess as an officer. The academies instill in them the codes of the respective services and the skills unique to military service. Furthermore, some of the skills the academies hone—a grasp of military strategy and leadership, for example—are sufficiently specialized that they are unlikely to be readily available in broader academia.

As with any other educational institution, the service academies face tradeoffs. Time spent studying military history is time not spent studying economics or chemistry. These tradeoffs are appropriate for the military as an employer, however, given the common tasks that await graduates. They are also appropriate for the cadets, since they have a clear career path ahead of them. They need not fear that academic deficiencies in common areas of study will make them less desirable to their future employer.

Contrast all this with the proposed Academy. In addition to preparing students for the relatively well defined duties of public service, the Academy would need to develop in its students a very broad range of skills. They might serve in federal, state, or local government. They might work in urban planning, education, diplomacy, banking regulation, patent approval, agriculture, drug regulation, transportation, or as prosecutors. If the Academy opted to narrow its focus,

however, it would limit its broad usefulness in staffing the government and become more like specialized schools that already exist, such as the Foreign Service Institute for the State Department or the Graduate School of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Academy might foster a sense of common purpose among its students and graduates. However, in a pool of over 22 million government employees,[6] the 1,300 graduates of the Academy would unlikely be situated with their fellow public service graduates. Their developed camaraderie would count for little. Their performance would ultimately depend on their developed expertise. Furthermore, they would be judged against graduates of other institutions who had devoted more time to conventional academic pursuits.

Caliber of Students. It is not clear that a well-functioning Academy would attract the nation's best students. The push for geographic diversity in the student body and the loss of career control could deter the most qualified potential applicants. The prospect of a free education and a government career launch would certainly attract applicants, but these would likely be students who had fewer options (e.g. other scholarships) or who were less confident in their prospects on the open market. This begins to sound like a recipe for creating an enthused but mediocre cadre of government workers. Even if we deemed quality less important than quantity, the limited number of Academy graduates would hardly dent the coming exodus of federal retirees.

Competition against conventional graduates could confront Academy graduates very quickly. For many of the tasks described above, some degree of post-graduate education is required. Without a graduate education, the career paths open to Academy graduates would be seriously limited. If they decided to pursue graduate studies (which the Academy would subsidize in exchange for an extended commitment) they would need to be competitive with other applicants for spots in the relevant professional or graduate schools.

Could the Academy turn out students who would compete against the nation's best? To picture the enormity of this challenge, imagine that the ambition of the Academy was limited to

[6] Most recent number of government employees (including federal, state, and local levels) as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. See http://data.bls.gov/PDQ/outside.jsp?survey=ce.

preparing competitive candidates for law school. The Academy would need only to excel in those fields that law schools consider most carefully: English, history, economics, and political science. How hard would it be to put together nationally competitive programs in these four disciplines? Extremely hard.

Recruiting and Retaining Faculty. The country's top universities, with sterling reputations all, find it very challenging to stay on top of these fields. Their existing competitors try relentlessly to ascend the ranks. They all compete for the handful of academic stars in the professoriate. They all bid for the most promising new doctorates on the job market. They offer high salaries, reduced teaching loads, and—when they can—the promise of working with distinguished colleagues and brilliant graduate students. They offer the attention and prestige that come with a post at a top institution. Whether these academic stars are better at teaching undergraduates than their less-exalted colleagues at other schools is an open question, but their graduate or law school recommendations certainly carry more weight.

The instructors with the requisite expertise to teach at military academies are usually already in the military service. At the United States Military Academy at West Point, for example, almost 80 percent of the faculty is made up of rotating or senior military officers.[7] There are a limited number of private sector job openings for an expert in military strategy. The military service academies must compete with academia for their English and economics professors, but they are under little pressure to attract the hottest young researchers in these fields.

Now imagine the new Academy trying to staff all of these popular departments. What could it offer potential faculty to lure them away? It would be unlikely to outbid the established institutions. How would it balance support for research against teaching responsibilities? It would not have any graduate students with which the faculty could work and it is not clear that it would have dazzling undergraduate prospects. It would not have an established reputation of academic freedom or sound governance to reassure newcomers. Instead, it would offer the prospect of working for the Department of Homeland Security.

[7] Information is available on West Point's website: http://www.dean.usma.edu/TeachingAndLearning/faculty.cfm.

The obstacles seem insurmountable, even with the limited task of producing government lawyers. Now think of trying to produce excellence across the full spectrum of government needs, in fields where research can become truly expensive—requiring chemistry labs, research animals, and engineering facilities. There would only be two choices open to the Academy.

First, it could follow the approach of liberal arts colleges such as Williams or Swarthmore and emphasize teaching. Of course, it would still be competing with these schools for faculty. Without a heavy investment in research faculty and the accompanying facilities, the Academy would be less likely to expose students to cutting edge science. To be cutting edge across all disciplines, however, would be prohibitively expensive and thus likely require a degree of specialization. Such specialization might limit the Academy's ability to meet the broad needs of the civil service.

Proponents of the Academy hark back to eighteenth century calls for a national educational institution. But education has changed a great deal since then. Students are expected not just to have mastered selected great works and developed a capacity for critical thought. The scholarship of the last two centuries has left ample, specialized substance for students to cover in courses. The balance between general and specific courses in an education is one with which top institutions constantly grapple. This balance necessarily depends on the demands of future employers or of post-graduate educational institutions. It has undoubtedly changed dramatically since the time of Jefferson.

Alternatively, the Academy could try to cover the full range of academic needs and accept that it will not generally be able to attract top faculty. It could certainly find faculty, particularly in fields such as English and history where it is notoriously difficult for new doctorates to find an academic position. But this approach would likely mean an inferior education. That would be no great surprise; very few institutions soar through the academic rankings, even if they have been around for decades. The prospect of mediocre training, however, compounds the question about whether top students would seek to attend the Academy and casts doubt on the kind of employment commitments that could be promised to students who might not emerge as competitive candidates for government jobs.

How Would This Look to Students?

If a high school student wishes to pursue a career in the United States Navy, there is no more promising educational path than seeking admission to the Naval Academy in Annapolis. Suppose, instead, that a student wishes to pursue a career in the civil service. What choices might that student make?

The premise of a student seeking a career in the general civil service is questionable. It is much more plausible that a student would think about serving as a lawyer, scientist, engineer, or linguist. How many high school students would really be indifferent between these careers and willing to let someone else choose?

This poses a dilemma for the Academy: how would it resolve a mismatch between student interests and government needs? A student gets to declare a specialty in foreign policy, but suppose the Foreign Service is oversubscribed and the public sector needs urban transportation experts. How would this solve the staffing problem? Within specialties, part of the proposal for the Academy is that students will be directed to where they are needed and required to perform public service upon graduation. The wary student might well ask who would be making these decisions about the government's needs and the student's aptitude and at what stage in the student's education. Such a savvy student might also deduce that since decisions are to be based on the government's needs, he or she would be limited to the least popular and hardest to fill branches of government.

The proposal offers to pay for every year of graduate study in exchange for an extra two years of civil service. This, however, significantly raises the cost of the program. The Academy also requires students to work for at least two years before pursuing graduate work, precluding graduates from having the choice of proceeding directly to post-graduate study. This requirement touches on the difficult question of whether it is better to work for a time between undergraduate and graduate education or whether a student should proceed directly to post-graduate study. There is no right answer, of course. Students with time in the work force may be more motivated for further study. On the other hand, they will have spent years at a lower salary and with less challenging work than if they had proceeded directly.

An existing college or university would offer a better education, more choice in regard to an area of concentration, more choice in educational and work sequence, and brighter prospects for post-graduate study. Aside from the paid education, would there be any other cost to opting out of the Academy?

For those government agencies which choose to participate, the Academy could clearly smooth their entry into government, since participating agencies would have to agree to place graduates on a fast track to leadership positions. This raises problems of its own.

First, Academy preferences would have to be balanced against the existing preference program for military service veterans. Would Academy graduates be placed ahead of or behind those who served in uniform? Either way, any preference would explicitly acknowledge that the costly Academy had produced inferior talent for the government (else there would be no need for preferences). It is hard to imagine that the State Department would choose an Academy graduate over an Ivy League graduate for the Foreign Service just on the basis of enhanced civic-mindedness. What happens to the desirability of the program if the most desirable agencies opt out?

From the perspective of a prospective student, the Academy's sole advantages are its price and employment certitude. How will a free ride at the Academy compare to attendance at Harvard, Yale, or Stanford? Setting aside the fact that all three colleges have been vigorously lowering their cost for the applicants who will be most price-sensitive, students choose relatively expensive educational programs all the time in the hopes of brightening their prospects for the future. Nor is unemployment a major concern for graduates of these top programs. This leaves us with little reason to think that the Academy will attract a student body noticeably better than its mediocre faculty would merit.

Compare to Alternatives: A Scholarship Program

The recurrent theme of the preceding section is that our existing colleges and universities are hard to beat. But why do we have to? If we are willing to spend $40,000 per student per year—

a rough estimate of the cost of the proposed Academy—then the government could establish scholarships in exchange for public service. These could be competitive, rather than the subject of a political selection process. They could be limited to areas of need. They could include service requirements commensurate with the amount of funding provided (recognizing that students may not decide to become urban planning majors until later in their college careers). Such a program would be substantially more flexible and also less prone to political influence. It would ensure the government access to the best talent in the country, trained at the best institutions in the world.

The downside would be that the students would pursue their educations independently of each other. The students would emerge with only the civic-mindedness that drove them to apply for the scholarships. Both deficiencies might be remedied with summer events as part of the scholarship. As noted above, it is not clear that the joint learning experience would be anywhere near as valuable in preparation for the disparate needs of the civil service as it is in preparation for a military career. Nor is it clear that public spirit can be effectively grown through training.

If, as the proposal suggests, there is an overemphasis on graduate training and the real staffing needs lie in K-12 education or police ranks, then the proposal looks wildly overpriced. It cites a figure of $20,000 debt per college graduate currently and argues that this deters graduates from public service. In this case, one could create a program of signing bonuses that would erase debt in exchange for a period of service. In fact, just such a program was enacted as part of the Higher Education Act of 2007, which provides loan forgiveness for those who serve in various public service capacities.[8]

Paradoxically, the proposed Academy would require a dramatically higher willingness to sacrifice for the government than the existing civil service. A prospective entrant would need to be willing to have the Department of Homeland Security oversee their education and set the first five years of their career according to perceived government need. This is substantially more onerous than the present system in which law graduates can choose whether or not to spend some time as a public defender in the city of their choice.

---

[8] House Committee on Education and Labor, "The College Opportunity and Affordability Act of 2007: Expanding College Access, Strengthening our Future," November 2007, available at http://edlabor.house.gov/publications/20071109COAASummary.pdf (accessed April 9, 2008).

Conclusion

While the parallel between the military academies and the Public Service Academy has an appeal, symbolism and symmetry only go so far. Ultimately, educational institutions are meant to prepare students for their adult lives. The careers of civil servants and those of military officers are too different to support easy parallels. To spend scarce public funds creating an Academy that would provide students an inferior education and saddle the government with sub-par employees is problematic enough. To do so without solving the government's staffing problems and while bypassing the country's highly successful colleges and universities would be truly unwise.