In today’s competitive economy, internships have become an increasingly integral—and even necessary—part of most students’ efforts to prepare for the workforce. According to results from the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ 2013 Student Survey, nearly two-thirds of graduating seniors participated in at least one internship or cooperative education assignment while pursuing their bachelor’s degree. While students gain “real-world” experience and professional connections that often prove valuable as they seek post-graduation employment, many employers view internships as an opportunity to develop new talent and observe a candidate’s on-the-job performance before making a hiring decision. Based on findings from recent student and employer surveys conducted by Internships.com, the arrangement appears to be mutually beneficial: 87 percent of student respondents from the class of 2013 said their internships were a positive experience, and 84 percent of employers reported a positive experience hiring interns. Perhaps more importantly, of the large companies surveyed by Internships.com in 2012, 69 percent made full-time job offers to interns. Nearly 40 percent of small companies (those with fewer than 50 employees) also reported hiring interns for full-time positions.

For those of us looking to pursue a career in public service, however, one critical employer has been noticeably absent from the intern-hiring trend: the federal government. As Steve Kelman of The Lectern recently noted in his blog post, “the value of internships has not traditionally been recognized. Interns who wanted a federal job just joined the queue with all other applicants—wading into the often-nightmarish (especially for young people) federal hiring process.”

But thanks to the government’s relatively new Pathways Programs, which were implemented in 2012 following President Obama’s Executive Order 13562, current students and recent graduates may now find it a little easier to land a full-time job in the federal government. Designed to “promote employment opportunities for students and recent graduates in the Federal workforce,” Pathways consists of three individual programs, each of which provides for the possibility of full-time employment upon successful completion:

1) the Internship Program, which offers current high school, college, professional, technical, and graduate-level students an opportunity to complete a paid full- or part-time internship on a temporary or ongoing basis while completing their degree requirements;

2) the Recent Graduates Program, which provides individuals who have graduated from qualifying programs or educational institutions within the previous two years an opportunity to work at an agency for at least one year while participating in developmental and mentorship activities; and
3) the revamped Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program, which provides exceptional advanced degree candidates an opportunity to participate in a two-year agency appointment during which they partake in leadership development activities and a possible rotation at a second agency.

I encourage interested readers to check out Steve Kelman’s above-referenced blog post, as well as the Partnership for Public Service’s helpful “Pathways Myth Busters” document, which outline little-known details about the Pathways Programs and debunk several common myths. Drawn primarily from these sources, here are the five most important facts you need to know about converting a Pathways Internship into a full-time government job:

1. **Eligibility for conversion to the competitive service:** Student interns who accumulate 640 hours of service—or 320 hours if they demonstrate exceptional job performance or academic achievement (i.e., obtain at least a 3.5 GPA)—may be eligible for noncompetitive conversion to a full-time job. In other words, after working full-time for four months or, in some cases, as little as two months, interns may be directly hired into the government without additional advertising of the position.

2. **Credit for third-party and previous government internships:** Once a student has applied and is accepted into the Internship Program, an agency may grant up to 320 hours of credit (half of the total service requirement) for previous participation in eligible volunteer or third-party internship programs, thereby decreasing the length of service necessary for conversion. Students may also receive credit for hours worked under previous Pathways Internship appointments.

3. **Conversion period:** While the implementing regulation states that agencies must convert an intern to the competitive service within 120 days of successfully completing the program, this period does not begin until the intern has completed all requirements associated with his or her academic course of study. This means that a student could participate in a full-time summer or semester-long internship, return to school, and be eligible for conversion to a full-time position for up to 120 days after graduation.

4. **Agency placement:** Internship Program participants who meet all program requirements may be noncompetitively converted to a full-time position at any agency, not just the agency at which they completed their internship.

5. **Veterans’ preference:** Although applicable when initially hiring for the Internship Program, agencies are not required to apply veterans’ preference prior to noncompetitively converting an intern to a full-time position.