

The Presidential Management Intern Program— Jumpstart to a Career in Federal Government

by Paula Nailon

From the moment she entered law school, **Amy Wuebbels** (University of Arizona, Class of 2002) knew she wanted an exciting, non-traditional job in government after graduation. She had worked on political campaigns from the age of 13 and also spent 4½ years as Assistant Director of Special Projects and Protocol for New York Governor George Pataki. During law school, Wuebbels continued to gain governmental experience by clerking for the State Attorney General's Solicitor's Office and interning for both the United States Senate Judiciary Committee and the Arizona Legislature. She had high expectations for her first job after graduation.

Students like Wuebbels are exciting to counsel, and yet present unique challenges. As a quick look at the *Federal Yellow Book* illustrates, federal government structure is complex. The hiring process is confusing and complicated, even for traditional law jobs. For students who want something different, the task is daunting for them and for their career services counselors.

The Presidential Management Intern (PMI) Program is tailor-made for students who, like Wuebbels, are interested in careers in analysis and management of public policy. The program is managed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Since its creation in 1977, over 6,000 PMIs have been hired by every Cabinet department and over 50 federal agencies. The two-year program, for law graduates and graduate students from other disciplines, may become permanent at the end of a successful internship.

Wuebbels was accepted into the PMI program and hired by the State Department as a Management Analyst for the Bureau of Diplomatic Secu-

rity. "I feel very lucky to have this position," she said. "Among my responsibilities will be lobbying on the Hill, to explain about security measures needed by various U.S. embassies. It is a fast-paced job, with varied responsibilities, and this is a position that would normally not have been available to me right out of law school."

Profiles of PMIs

There are a broad range of job opportunities, as illustrated by the following examples.

- **Vidya Kurella** (Columbia, Class of 2000) was a Management Analyst with the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys in the Department of Justice and now has a permanent position as an Attorney Advisor with the Legal Counsel in the same office. She enjoyed many rotations as a PMI, one of them on Capitol Hill with the Senate Judiciary Committee. Kurella valued her time as a PMI because it allowed her to focus more on people skills, organization, and management techniques.
- **Royce Bernstein Murray** (Georgetown, Class of 2000), who entered law school desiring a career in international human rights, was hired by the Office of International Affairs for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. While a PMI, her office sent her to Asylum Officer Basic Training and then Africa for two months to conduct refugee interviews. In another rotation, she served as INS contact for inquiries from prospective adoptive parents and Congressional offices on Cambodian adoptions. She has just accepted a permanent position with the Office of General Counsel, in the Asylum and Refugee Division of INS,

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where one of her responsibilities will be to deal with international law issues.

- **Jon Teitel** (University of Arizona, Class of 2001) works in the Enforcement Branch of the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity for the Department of Housing & Urban Development in Boston. He investigates complaints of housing discrimination and conducts compliance reviews to ensure that housing authorities are complying with the law. Teitel, who has always been a civil rights advocate, finds his job particularly rewarding because it directly impacts people suffering from the effects of housing discrimination.

Application and hiring process

The application and hiring process, different than most honors programs, is described in detail at www.pmi.opm.gov. Briefly, schools develop a competitive selection process and may nominate up to 10% of the annual total number of graduates, or five graduates, whichever is greater. By October 31, selected students submit an application (on the web until October 31), signed by the law school dean, plus a résumé.

Next, selected applicants are invited to a structured one-day assessment center, held during January and February in various U.S. locations. For most law students, this type of screening (which includes role plays, group interviews, and written assessments) is unfamiliar. Advance preparation will calm nerves and result in better performance. In many universities, the Department of International Affairs or Public Policy will be more familiar with the PMI program and may offer preparatory workshops in which law students may participate.

Finalists are notified in mid-March and given a handbook, which contains agency profiles and a description of projected positions. Designation as a finalist does not guarantee a job, but finalists are invited to an invitation-only Job Placement Fair in Washington, D.C., in late spring. Most candidates interview for positions at this

fast-paced and exciting event, which has a limited amount of time and a large number of employers. Advance preparation is crucial, because students are certain to interview with offices that are unfamiliar to them. Students should also think about how limiting geographic locations will limit opportunities. Jon Teitel recommends ranking job possibilities before, and then after the job fair, to incorporate information learned at the interview into the ranking.

He also urges students to be specific about overall career goals and the fit of each job description. Focusing on a particular agency or department may not be useful, because agency names are not always determinative of the type of work handled by the position. Royce Bernstein Murray advises, “Think as broadly as you can regarding employers, but stay true to what you want to be doing. As a previous human rights advocate, the idea of working for INS seemed unusual, but they dealt with ideas which were important to me, and it has worked out very well.”

Offers

Job offers come soon after the Job Placement Fair. Vidya Kurella offers this advice about accepting job offers: “Research the agency before you accept a job offer and make sure you have a clear understanding of what the agency will provide during those two years, as far as training and professional growth. PMI is not so much about OPM and the PMI as it is about your agency. You can get an incredibly broad range of experiences, but the perfect match depends on your placement.”

Training and career development

In addition to helping students land coveted jobs in federal government, PMI offers unparalleled career development opportunities, including training, mentoring, and peer support. New PMIs attend a three-day orientation to gain an overall perspective of how the federal government and

the PMI program operate, as well as to meet one another. They also participate in a minimum of 80 hours of formal training each year and develop personalized training goals.

One of the most popular aspects of the program is the opportunity for a job rotation. This is a short-term developmental assignment in another branch, division, office, program, or even another agency or branch of government, typically lasting four to six months. Through rotations, PMIs gain management experience, work in a different occupational field, learn about a program's function from another perspective, and make new contacts. Many rotational opportunities are advertised; others are located based on personal interest.

Finally, Career Development Groups (CDGs) are a core part of the experience. Incoming PMIs are assigned to a CDG that cuts across agency lines and brings together around 25 interns with a broad range of experience and interests. Groups are assisted by two senior-level managers and meet several times per year for professional and social activities. CDGs help PMIs build a network between peers and federal government officials which can be used throughout a PMI's career.

Other benefits

Many PMIs are now high-ranking federal officials and managers, and the program has a reputation for attracting the best and brightest to the government. This is not surprising, because new graduates have access to exciting and varied jobs, which would not normally be open to them. They are linked into a network of other bright and articulate people who are interested in public policy and are employed in a variety of federal agencies and departments. They will receive exceptional training and mentoring opportunities and can expect great promotion potential and to quickly advance in salary, benefits, and opportunities. They are truly on the fast track to an exciting career, and at the same time are working for the public good.

If your law school is not promoting this opportunity to your 3Ls and LLMs, you are missing a rare opportunity! ■

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