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Undergraduate Attitudes toward Careers in Public Service





Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Background	3
Survey Respondents.....	6
Results	7
In Their Own Words.....	14
A Desire for More Information	17
Perspectives from Students and Practitioners	18
Recruitment, Engagement, and Further Research	21
Conclusion.....	23

Executive Summary

MissionSquare Research Institute has conducted several studies on public sector recruitment and on the factors that motivate those who are seeking employment in the public sector or those who are early-career public employees. One gap in that research has been an investigation of how those who are still at the undergraduate level may decide whether to consider public employment, particularly among those in fields where there is high demand for workers in both the public and private sectors.

This study surveyed students in accounting, computer science, criminal justice, engineering, and nursing to assess:

- Their thoughts on public sector employment
- What exposure they may have had to public sector organizations
- What factors most influence their career decisions.

Key Findings



51% have at least some **interest in public sector employment** (Figure 4).



Computer science and accounting/finance students were **least likely to be aware** that public sector jobs were available within their fields (Figure 10).



Those who had **family or friends** working in state or local government were more likely to be interested in public employment, but this was not among the factors most influencing their preference (Figures 11 and 14).



Internships, career fairs, and part-time work were positively correlated with interest in the public sector, while visits to the state capitol, city hall, or mock legislative sessions elicited more polarized responses (Figure 13).



Among all respondents, the top considerations in choice of work sector were **salary, work/life balance, personal satisfaction, and job security** (Figure 14).



Those interested in the public sector were more likely to be driven by a desire for **work/life balance, meaningful work, or retirement benefits** (Table 4 and Figure 15).



From the open-ended comments, public sector **benefits and job stability** were viewed positively, while **salaries and the political environment** were more likely to be causes for concern (Figures 17 and 18).



Respondents expressed a wide range of questions about public employment, including about **opportunities in their field, typical duties, prospects for advancement, and application procedures** (Figure 20). Some of these questions indicated areas where governments may want to increase their outreach or communications, particularly to an audience that is unfamiliar with how state and local governments function.

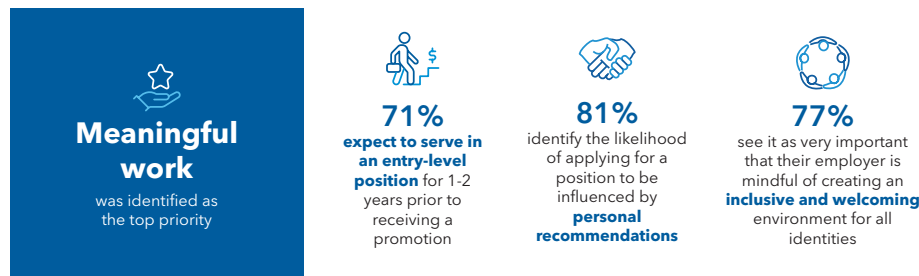
Background

MissionSquare Research Institute has been studying the public sector talent pipeline through surveys of human resources managers since 2009. The Institute also conducted a student survey in 2015 in collaboration with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA).¹ That survey yielded data on various aspects of career planning and recruiting, such as that the respondents identified the top attribute to consider in job hunting as a **competitive salary** (59%), followed closely by the **opportunity to make a difference** (58%). But with three quarters of the participating students pursuing a Master's in Public Administration (MPA), the findings were most relevant to those who already had a goal of working in local government management.

A similar study in 2023 focused on local government management fellowship applicants with Lead for America, with **meaningful work**, **personal recommendations**, and an **inclusive environment** among the motivating factors.

Figure 1: **Attitudes among local government fellowship applicants**

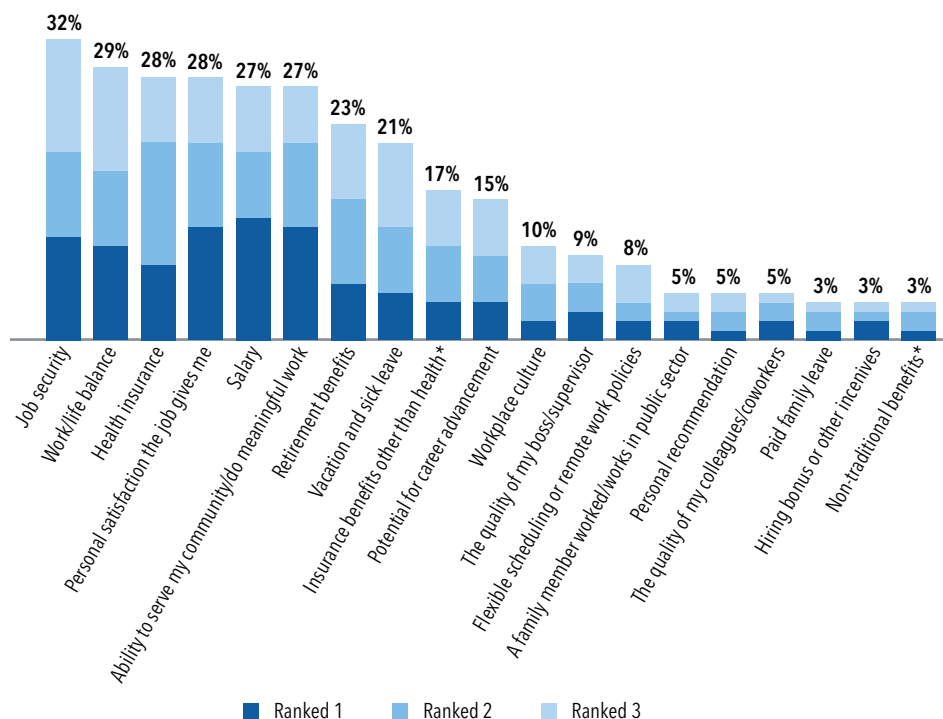
Source: [New Career Entrants in Public Service: Lessons for Employers from Fellowship Applicants](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023.



In another survey that year, state and local government employees 35 and under identified **salary**, **personal satisfaction**, and the **ability to do meaningful work** as most likely to be their top priority, with job security and work/life balance most likely to be listed among their top three priorities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: **Top three factors initially attracting you to work in the public sector (among current employees 35 and under)**

Source: [35 and Under in the Public Sector: Why Younger Workers Enter and Why They Stay \(or Don't\)](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023.
Figure shortened for readability; see report for complete data.



* Insurance benefits other than health include, for example, life insurance, dental, vision, and disability insurance. Non-traditional benefits include, for example, tuition assistance, student loan repayment, or child care assistance.

In the Institute’s annual state and local government workforce survey, conducted in partnership with the [Public Sector HR Association](#) and the [National Association of State Personnel Executives](#), 2025 responses about successful recruitment strategies included:

- 31% conducting college outreach, partnerships, or job fairs
- 18% offering internships or apprenticeships
- 12% building a communications campaign around public service
- 4% conducting K-12 outreach or providing civic curriculum²

The large percentages not reporting any of these might point to a missed opportunity for reaching potential job candidates.

Public service and meaningful work are certainly a feature of state and local government, although some students may be seeking them elsewhere. Beyond the Research Institute’s studies, City College of New York reports high enrollment in the Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership as an example of a continuing interdisciplinary interest in public service, but one through which students are also considering nonprofit opportunities.³

This study explores a segment of the future workforce that has not yet committed to any particular sector – current undergraduate students outside of government or public administration programs. Key questions include:

- Whether undergraduate students are aware of public sector job opportunities
- What might have led to that awareness
- What factors may contribute to positive or negative assessments of public service
- Whether students identify an interest in potential public sector and/or nonprofit sector work, and
- How employers might better reach these potential future employees.

Occupational Focus

Rather than perform a general survey of undergraduate students, this data collection specifically targeted those enrolled in five academic fields for which jobs are available in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and which state and local governments have identified as hard to fill.

Table 1: **Percentage of HR Managers Rating Occupations in Corresponding Academic Fields as Hard to Fill**

Source: [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#).

Academic field	2024	2025
Nursing	77%	66%
Engineering	71%	71%
Criminal justice	68%	66%
Accounting/finance	47%	38%
Computer science	45%	40%

Pathways exist to work in some of these fields without a degree or other specialized licensing. For example, information technology skills may be developed via industry certifications and related experience. In addition, an undergraduate student's major is not the sole determinant of their career path. Indeed, psychology students may pursue careers in marketing, human resources, criminal justice, or clinical practice, and employers seeking information technology talent may recruit across an array of educational backgrounds and provide any necessary upskilling afterward.⁴

Regarding policing, while it is uncommon for a criminal justice or other degree to be required, in the Institute's study of public sector employees 35 and under, 60% of those in public safety had a bachelor's degree or higher.⁵ And in the Institute's survey on student debt, 58% of those working in public safety have incurred at least some student debt, whether in criminal justice or some other field.⁶

While 2025 saw fewer governments reporting hiring difficulties, a number of staffing challenges remain, including that 46% see the largest wave of baby boom retirements still to come in the next few years and that many recruitment efforts continue to garner fewer qualified applicants than the number of vacant positions.⁷

Methodology

To facilitate the surveying of undergraduate students, it was determined to partner once again with ICMA in outreach to its network of more than 130 [student chapters](#). This collaboration provided not only a pathway to identify interested public administration programs but also a means for these programs to identify graduate students to serve as on-site research assistants.

Initial outreach took place at the 2024 ICMA annual conference in Pittsburgh/Allegheny County, both with student chapter attendees and the association's Graduate Education Committee. This was followed by several rounds of outreach to the full roster of student chapter faculty advisors and student contacts, as well as communications with other associations and professors.

In order to reflect a wide range of student backgrounds, particular attention was given to including schools of varying size and geography. All but one - the University of La Verne - are public institutions.

Schools participating in this study include:

Table 2: **Participating Universities**

School	Location	Undergraduate enrollment
University of Central Florida	Orlando, Fla.	65,000
Arizona State University	Tempe, Ariz.	57,000
Indiana University	Bloomington, Ind.	37,000
Georgia Southern University	Statesboro, Ga.	23,000
James Madison University	Harrisonburg, Va.	21,000
University of Oregon	Eugene, Ore.	20,000
Idaho State University	Pocatello, Idaho	11,000
University of La Verne	La Verne, Calif.	3,000

The project goal was to survey all five academic fields across each participating school – accounting, computer science, criminal justice, engineering, and nursing – although some programs were not offered at all institutions. Where classes were offered within those disciplines, the research assistants identified non-introductory classes in each as their target audience. This was intended to increase the likelihood that the students enrolled were pursuing a major in that field, rather than taking the course as an elective.

For each of these classes, at a time agreed to by the instructor, the research assistants provided the undergraduate students with a brief overview of the research project and a QR code from which they could access the survey electronically and complete it if they so wished. No personal or school-specific information was collected as part of the survey and all respondents were required to certify that they were at least 18 years old.

Those goals aside, some research assistants encountered issues within individual disciplines, in which the instructors were not amenable to class visits, or with scheduling around the academic calendar. Where this was the case, the team strategized around additional pathways to completing the research, including through online classes, video introductions on the instructors’ class portals, professional association chapters, and campus career events.

Finally, the survey instrument made clear to the participants that not only would their individual responses remain anonymous, but they would likewise not be identified by state or school.

Survey Respondents

Data for this survey was collected between March 21 and August 23, 2025, with a total of 606 respondents.

Within engineering, 71% were studying civil engineering, with the remainder indicating a planned specialization in other fields (e.g., mechanical, industrial, or nuclear engineering).⁸

The “other” category represents students enrolled in one of the targeted academic classes who indicated a major in another area, such as psychology or mathematics.

Table 3: Respondents

Gender		Highest level of education planned	
Male	48%	Certificate	1%
Female	50%	Associate's degree	1%
Prefer to self-describe or not to respond	2%	Bachelor's degree	44%
		Master's or professional degree	39%
		Doctorate	7%
		Not sure	8%
Race/ethnicity		Primary field of study	
Asian or Pacific Islander	9%	Accounting/Business/Finance	26%
Black or African American	7%	Computer Science/Information Technology	16%
Hispanic/Latin/Spanish descent*	16%	Criminal Justice	15%
White or Caucasian	75%	Engineering	13%
Native American	1%	Nursing	20%
Prefer not to respond	1%	Other	12%
Other	1%		
NOTE: Total exceeds 100% because respondents were able to report multiple races or ethnicities.		NOTE: Total exceeds 100% due to rounding	
Subtotal: White, non-Hispanic	66%		
Subtotal: Hispanic or person of color	31%		

While respondents were students at the participating universities, the survey did not ask where they had completed their K-12 education. The goal was not to determine whether particular communities, school districts, or states did more to acquaint their youth with public sector job opportunities, but rather what impact any such formative experiences may have had on current attitudes toward public sector employment.

From a demographic standpoint, the students were not selected for racial, ethnic, or gender balance. Rather, they reflect the enrollment within the specific universities and classes surveyed. Given the smaller sample size for some categories, the breakouts that follow by race/ethnicity are limited to "White, non-Hispanic," and "Hispanic or person of color."

Results

Planned Educational and Career Paths

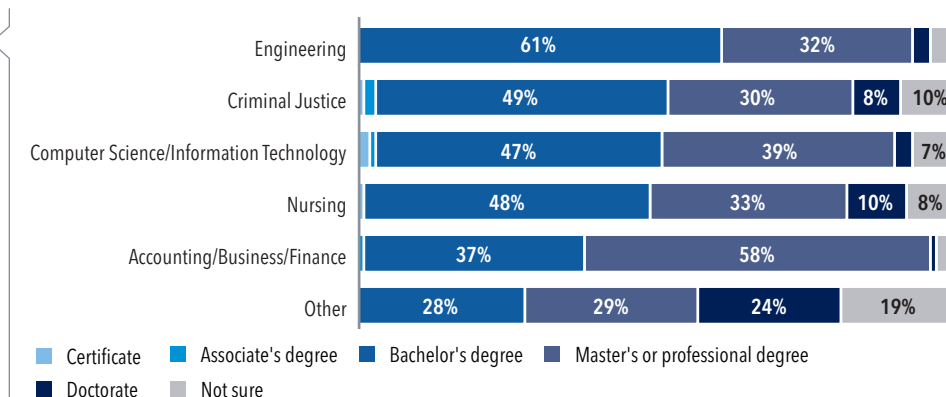
For employers looking to attract new job entrants, it is important to consider the stage at which students anticipate completing their education. In the Research Institute's report on [Student Debt in State and Local Government: Impacts on Select Occupations](#), the occupational review includes the typical entry-level education, which ranges from a high school diploma or equivalent for police officers to a bachelor's degree for accountants, engineers, and registered nurses. Within computer science, education requirements and pathways may vary by specific occupation.

Regardless of what it required, however, students already enrolled in undergraduate classes at a four-year university may already foresee at least a bachelor's degree as their educational goal. Indeed, that was the predominant response, although a small percentage indicated they were pursuing a certificate or associate's degree, while a sizeable percentage indicated they were pursuing a master's degree or higher.

Within the individual academic fields, engineering majors are most likely to say they wish to complete a bachelor's degree, while the interest in moving beyond a bachelor's degree is highest among accounting/business/finance majors (see Figure 3). This may indicate an interest in completing a Master's in Business Administration (MBA), but it may also include those pursuing an MPA, law degree, or other further studies.

Respondents were also asked about the employment sector(s) in which they anticipate working. This question was written to allow multiple answers, since some may foresee

Figure 3: **What is the highest level of education you are planning to complete (by major)?** (n = 603)

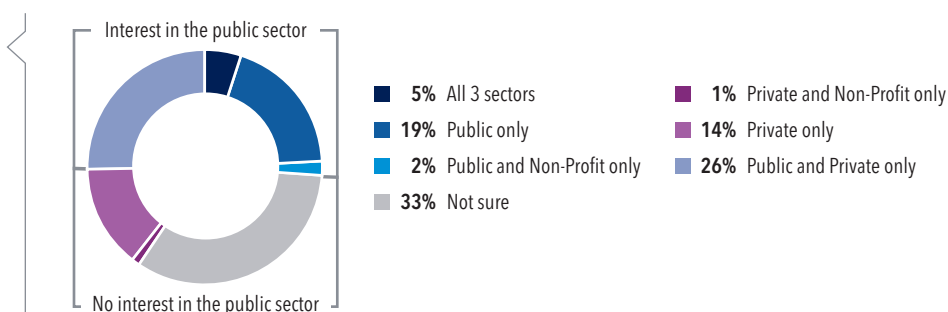


working in several sectors at different stages in their careers, or may at least be open to more than one choice of sectors for their first job post-graduation.

Including those who identified more than one possible choice, **51% expressed an interest in the public sector** (see the top half of Figure 4), while 33% were not sure what sector(s) they would consider.

Figure 4: **In what sector(s) do you anticipate working? select all that apply;** (n = 600)

NOTE: Non-profit only was 0% and is thus not shown on this graph.



Even among those who indicate an interest in the public sector there may be a narrower selection of employers in mind, particularly if their focus is on the federal government service or international issues. Still, just having an interest in a particular level of service does not mean that jobs will be available. While some finance respondents, for example, indicated a desire to work at the Internal Revenue Service, that agency has undergone a 25% staffing cut in 2025.⁹ In response to such cuts, local and state governments have increased their recruitment of current or former federal employees.¹⁰ In addition, while undergraduates may be open to considering the public sector, they may have lukewarm feelings about that as their first (or even second) choice.

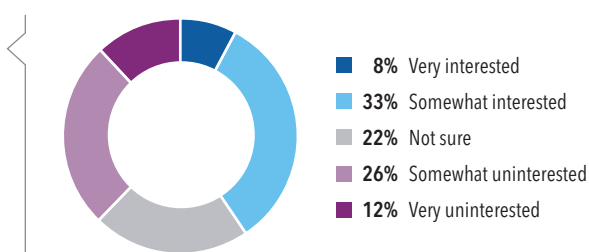
Among the reasons students may be considering more than one potential sector for work is that job tenure among younger workers tends to be shorter than among older workers (2.8 years for workers aged 25 to 34, compared to 9.6 years for workers aged 55-64).¹¹ Whether shorter tenure stems from COVID, the Great Resignation, a cultural/generational shift, or other factors, it may result in a greater openness to more than one career path. Government employers searching for a larger pool of candidates would benefit from encouraging those who had previously narrowed their sights to the private sector to consider other options as well, either for their first job out of school or at some point thereafter.

Level of Interest in the Public Sector

Just because students are open to working in the public sector does not mean that is their preference. Figure 5 shows the degree of interest in the public sector, with the share that are interested (41%) slightly outnumbering the share that are not interested (38%). For prospective employers, while the uninterested may be capable of being swayed, the 22% who are not sure may be the audience that simply needs to be made aware of their options.

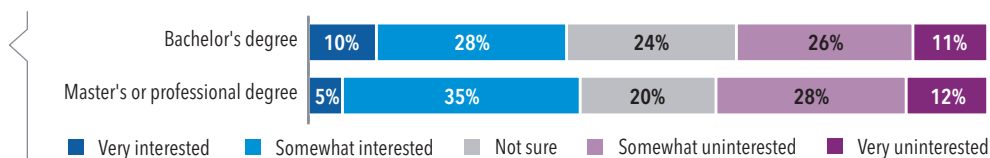
Figure 5: **How would you describe your level of interest in state or local government as an employer?** (n = 603)

NOTE: Total exceeds 100% due to rounding.



Educational goals do not appear to be a determining factor regarding career aspirations, as students pursuing a bachelor's degree are about equally likely as students pursuing a master's or other professional degree of saying they are at least somewhat interested in the public sector (38% vs. 40%; see Figure 6). The one notable difference is that students pursuing a bachelor's degree are more likely to say they are "very interested" in the public sector (10% vs. 5%).

Figure 6: **Level of interest in state or local government as an employer by anticipated education level;** (n = 505)



There is very little variation in interest based on gender or race/ethnicity (see Figure 7), but those studying criminal justice and civil engineering are much more likely to have an interest in the public sector (see Figure 8).

Figure 7: **Level of interest in state or local government employment by gender and race/ethnicity;** (n = 538)

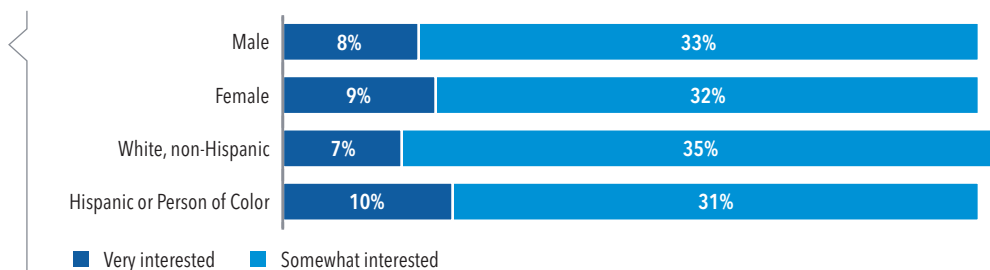
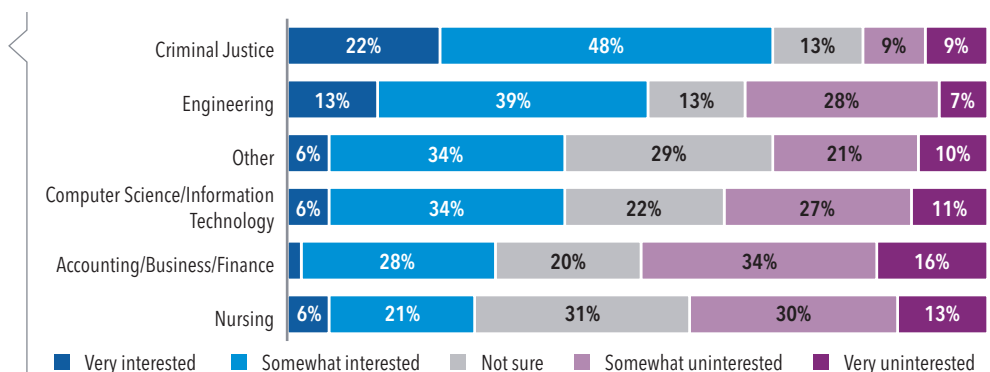


Figure 8: **Level of interest in state or local government employment by major;** (n = 603)

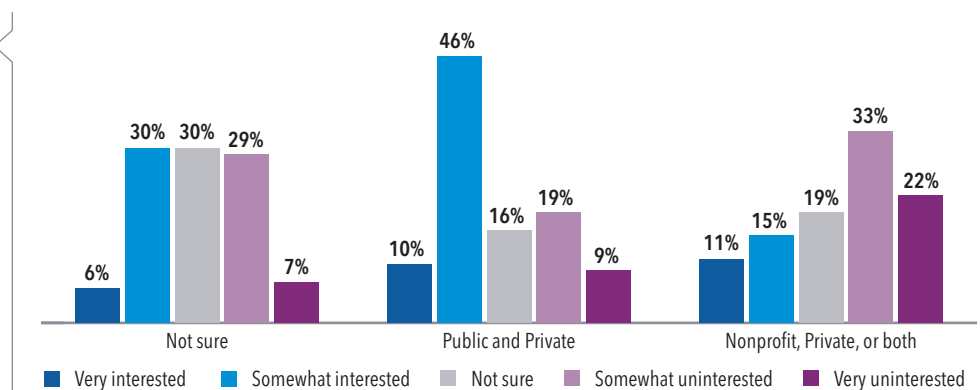
NOTE: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



In addition, even those who do not identify the public sector as among their projected employment tracks are likely to express being at least somewhat interested in it, including 36% who said they were not sure of their future employment sector and 26% who identified only private and/or nonprofit sectors as their preference (see Figure 9).

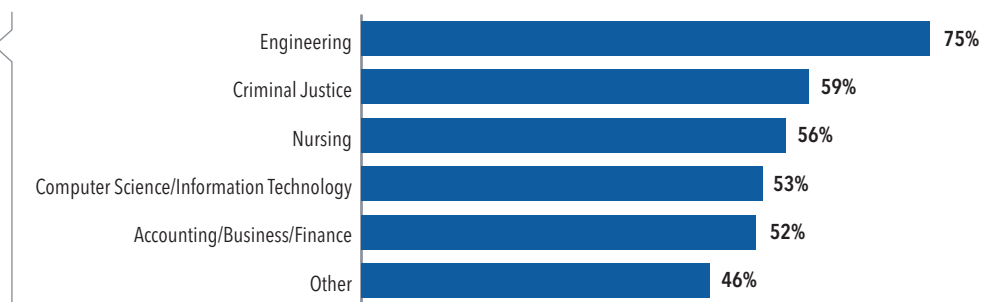
Across all three categories shown in Figure 9, there were also sizeable percentages who expressed negative attitudes toward public sector employment. Where there was interest in both the public and private sectors, there were twice as many positive as negative assessments of the public sector. Where there was interest in only the private or nonprofit sectors, there were twice as many negative as positive assessments of the public sector.

Figure 9: **Level of interest in state or local government by choice of sectors** (n = 544)



Even if the undergraduates in this survey mirrored the levels of service orientation seen in the MPA students in 2015, the translation of that interest into applications for state and local government job openings is contingent upon them knowing that those opportunities exist. As noted above, the degree programs targeted for this study were among those where vacancies are hardest to fill. And yet, when asked “Prior to today, were you aware that students within your field of study are in demand within state and local government?”, only 56% indicated awareness. The lowest level of awareness in one of the targeted degree fields was among students in accounting/business/finance (52%; see Figure 10).

Figure 10: **Prior to today, were you aware that students within your field of study are in demand within state and local government?** (n = 553)



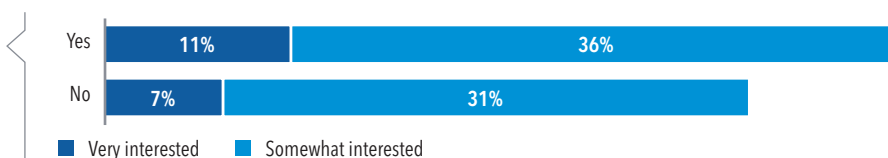
43% of respondents report having family or friends who work in state or local government.

Prior Exposure to the Public Sector

Career awareness can be built in multiple ways, the most visible being the branding and ubiquity of large private sector companies. Students may know very little about the government of the city or county where their campus is located or how their state's public health functions are administered, but they are surrounded by ads, products, and services from major technology and finance companies, as well as idealized stories of the laid-back culture and generous pay these companies may offer (even if those companies may also experience retrenchment, return to office mandates, and layoffs).

How is *government* career awareness built? Often this is done on a more personal scale. Of all respondents, 43% said they have family or friends who work in state or local government. And those who indicated a friend/family connection to state or local government were more likely to express interest in a public sector career (47% vs. 38%; see Figure 11). This is stronger correlation to interest in public sector employment than gender or race/ethnicity (see Figure 7).

Figure 11: **Interest in state or local government employment, by whether respondent has family or friends who work in state or local government** (n = 549)



Beyond that, the survey asked about a range of formative experiences (see Figure 12). Nearly half (48%) indicated that they had no prior experience with state or local government. The next most common roles were as a **volunteer, part-time employee, or intern**. In addition, several cited non-employment engagements, such as tours of government operations, police activities leagues, or youth commissions.

By comparison, in the Institute's 2023 study of *current* state and local employees 35 and under, 25% reported prior part-time work, while 12% reported volunteer involvement (12%).¹²

Figure 12: **What prior roles or experiences, if any, have you had with state or local government? select all that apply;** (n = 537)



Outreach through career fairs or college partnerships can also play a role. This may take place in a larger, multi-employer event or in a targeted visit by a single employer. For example, The Pennsylvania State University's College of the Liberal Arts career office reports having worked with individual federal law enforcement representatives that have sat in on their criminal justice courses for a more low-key opportunity to meet students on their own turf.¹³

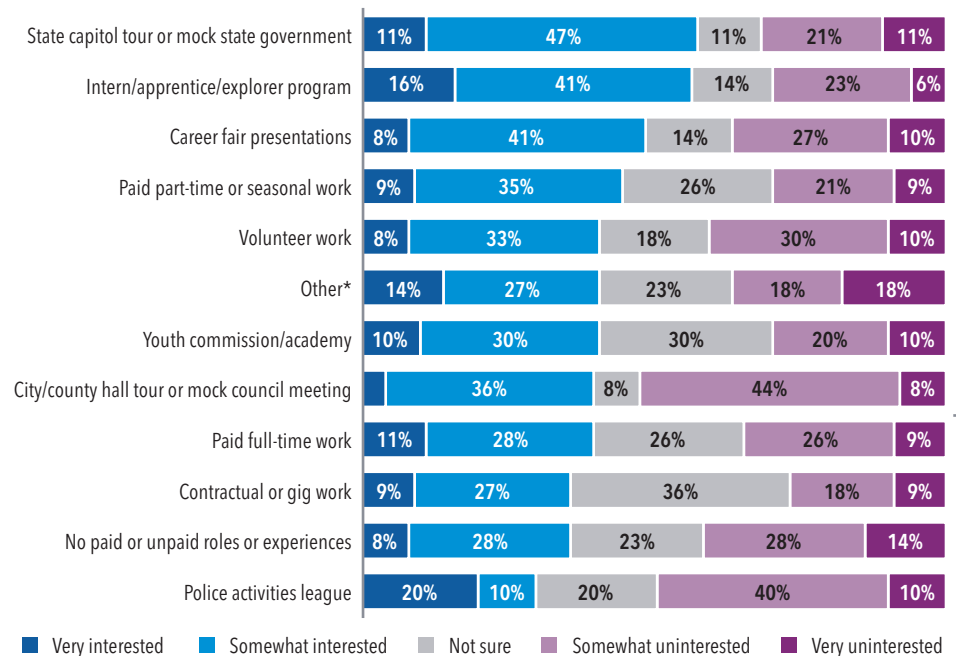
Do these exposures to the public sector make a difference? The pathways most correlated to respondents being very or somewhat interested in public sector employment are state capitol visits or mock state government programs (58%) and internship, apprenticeship, or explorer programs (57%), followed by career fair presentations and various part-time or volunteer engagements (see Figure 13).

It may be that a particular exposure (e.g., an internship) led to an interest in public employment, or conversely, that an interest in public employment led someone to pursue an internship. Either way, such programs can provide a hands-on opportunity for students to experience the work and service to the public, while maintaining an overall positive assessment of the field.

By contrast, those who participated in city/county hall tours or mock council meetings were more likely to have a negative attitude toward public employment (52%). Why this was the case and why some found state government engagements more positive may relate to whether such interactions focused on politics vs. potential career paths. (For more on this, see the discussion below in the section titled "In Their Own Words.")

Figure 13: **Prior roles or experiences, if any, with state or local government, by interest level in public sector employment** (n = 537)

*Due to small sample sizes for Americorps and Military/National Guard, they are included among "other" interactions within Figure 13.



NOTE: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Factors Impacting Choice of Employment Sector(s)

The driving factor – both as the top priority and as one of the top three priorities – that led someone to determine their interest in any particular sector is salary. That is followed by work/life balance, personal satisfaction, and job security (see Figure 14). Among all respondents, 69% view salary as their #1, 2, or 3 priority. By comparison, among current government employees 35 and under (Figure 2), only 27% ranked salary among their top three priorities.

There are some key differences between those who indicated an interest in working only in the public sector or *only* in the private sector (see Table 4). Salary is more likely to be among the top three factors for those targeting the private sector, while work/life balance, the ability to do meaningful work, and workplace culture are much more likely to be among the top three factors for those targeting the public sector.

Figure 14: **Please rank your top three of the following factors on how they impact your choice of work sector** (n = 606)

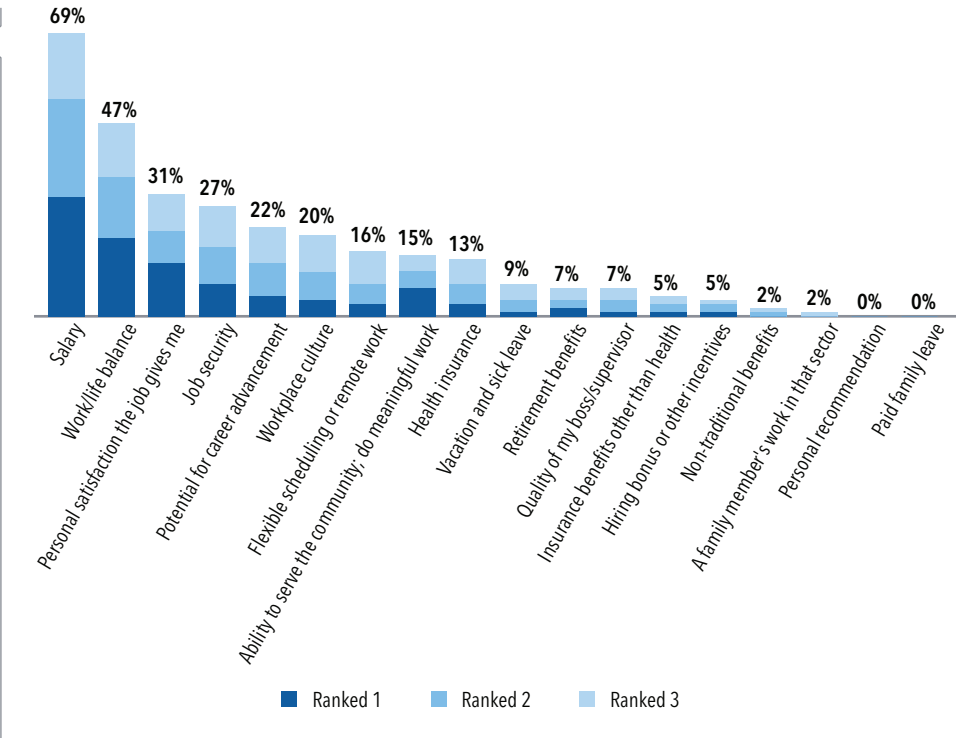


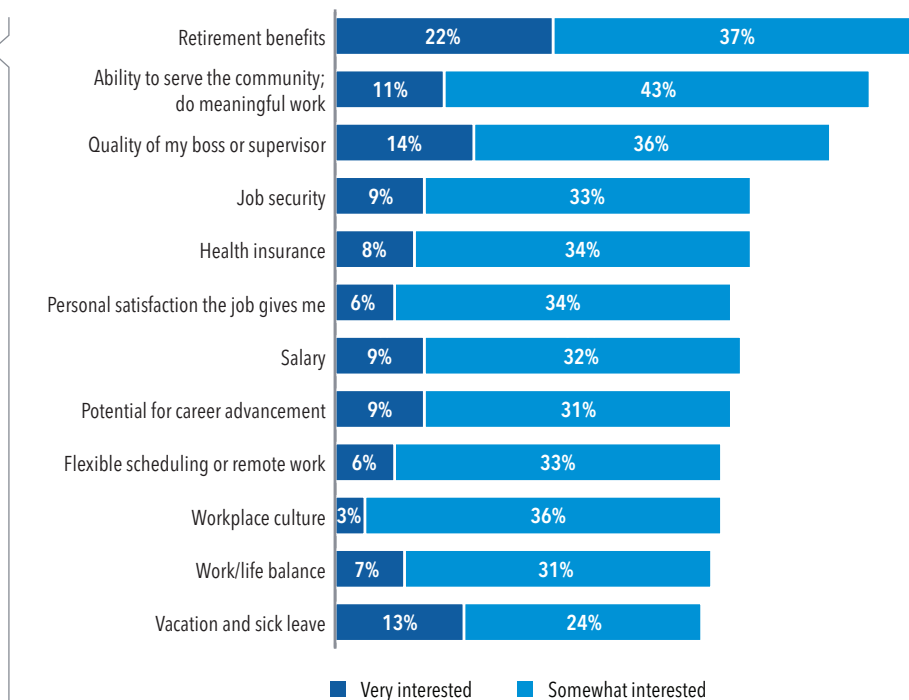
Table 4: **Percentage Ranking Selected Priorities as among Their Top Three factors, by Preferred Sector of Employment**

	Prefer public sector only	Prefer private sector only	Difference
Salary	66.4%	77.6%	-11.3%
Potential for career advancement	19.5%	30.6%	-11.1%
Personal satisfaction the job gives me	26.5%	35.3%	-8.7%
Job security	28.3%	28.2%	+0.1%
Workplace culture	20.4%	10.6%	+9.8%
Ability to serve the community; do meaningful work	17.7%	5.9%	+11.8%
Work/life balance	56.6%	43.5%	+13.1%

For each of those factors rated 1, 2, or 3, those responses were then compared to the level of interest in the public sector. Those who cited retirement benefits as being among their top three expressed a strong interest in public employment (59%), with the ability to do meaningful work close behind (54%; see Figure 15).

Figure 15: **For those identifying factors as being among the top three considerations in choice of work sector, how likely were respondents to be very or somewhat interested in the public sector?** (n = 603)

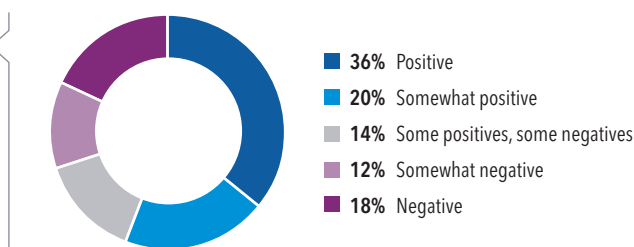
Note: Graph shows only those factors ranked among the top three priorities by at least 40 respondents.



In Their Own Words

To capture a more complete sense of what motivates (or de-motivates) an interest in public sector employment, the survey asked, "In your own words, please describe how you feel about state and local government as a potential employer." While some comments did not express an overall opinion on public employment, the majority of those who did do so offered a positive assessment. (see Figure 16).

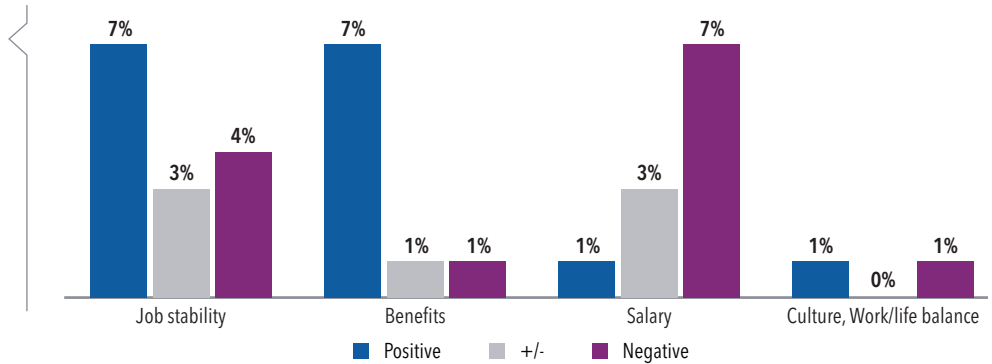
Figure 16: **State or local employment: Overall Assessment** (n = 274)



On major job characteristics (see Figure 17), they expressed:

- A positive assessment of public sector benefits
- A mixed assessment on job stability (with many references to the current political climate, layoffs, and funding cuts)
- A negative assessment of salary competitiveness

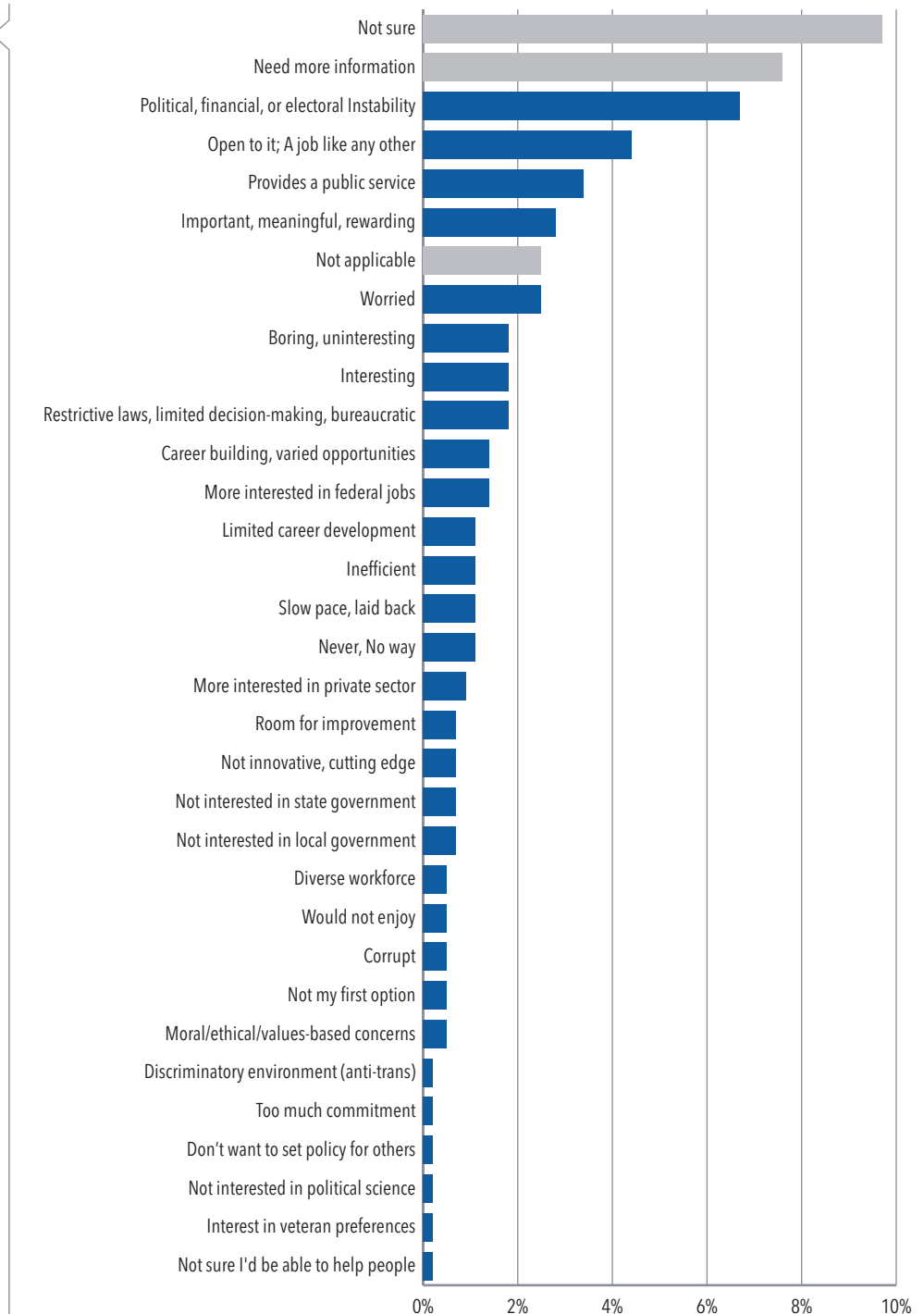
Figure 17: **State or local employment: Assessment of major factors** (n = 435)



In a much more detailed breakdown of their comments, the top responses reflected a lack of information (“not sure about the public sector” or “need more information”), but immediately after those was **concern due to political, financial, or electoral instability** (see Figure 18).

Some of the comments may reflect similar sentiments, but remain separate line items in the graph to allow a fuller understanding of the students’ statements (e.g., “would not enjoy” and “never, no way”).

Figure 18: **In your own words, please describe how you feel about state and local government as potential employers** (n = 435)



Who perceives the public sector as “too unstable”? Of those who raised concerns about political, funding, or electoral instability: **55% had no previous paid or unpaid roles or experiences in state or local government.**

A Desire for More Information

Why did so many express a desire for more information?

It could be based on their preferred information sources. The stereotype is that younger generations get most of their information from social media. HR managers appear to have taken that to heart, with social media near the top of their list of most successful recruitment strategies.¹⁴ But if the goal is to reach undergraduate students who are not even aware that jobs in their field exist within the public sector, they may be unlikely to be following their city, county, or state's social media accounts or see such listings pop up in their feed.

It could also be that state and local governments have not done as effective a job of communicating with students outside of political science or public administration programs.

Comparing the results from the survey of fellowship applicants with the most recent survey of HR managers, it would appear that college outreach efforts, internships, and apprenticeships may be among the better ways of acquainting students with the opportunities (see Figure 19). For example, while **31%** of HR managers think college outreach/partnerships are among the most successful strategies, **86%** of fellowship candidates support that approach.

Anticipating that this audience might not be fully aware of public sector employment opportunities, the survey also asked, "What information, if any, would you most want to learn about potential jobs in state and local government?"

Salary and benefits were among the areas where most respondents had questions, but others asked about what their roles might be in the government, what a **typical workday** might entail, and how to find job openings and work through the application process (see Figure 20).

Figure 19: **What recruitment practices are most successful in reaching qualified candidates? select all that apply) - excerpt** (n = 97, 354)

Sources: [New Career Entrants in Public Service: Lessons for Employers from Fellowship Applicants](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023, and [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.

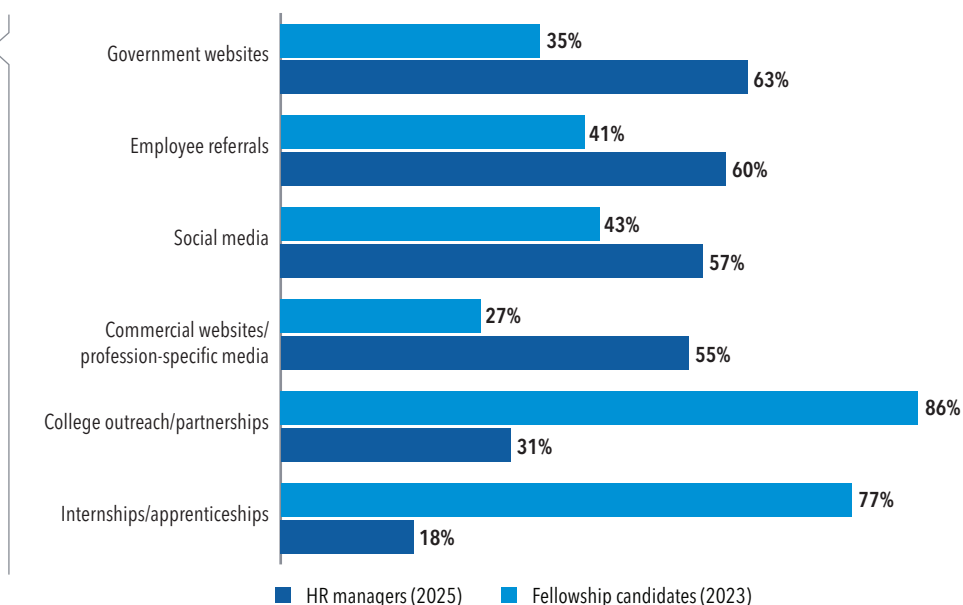
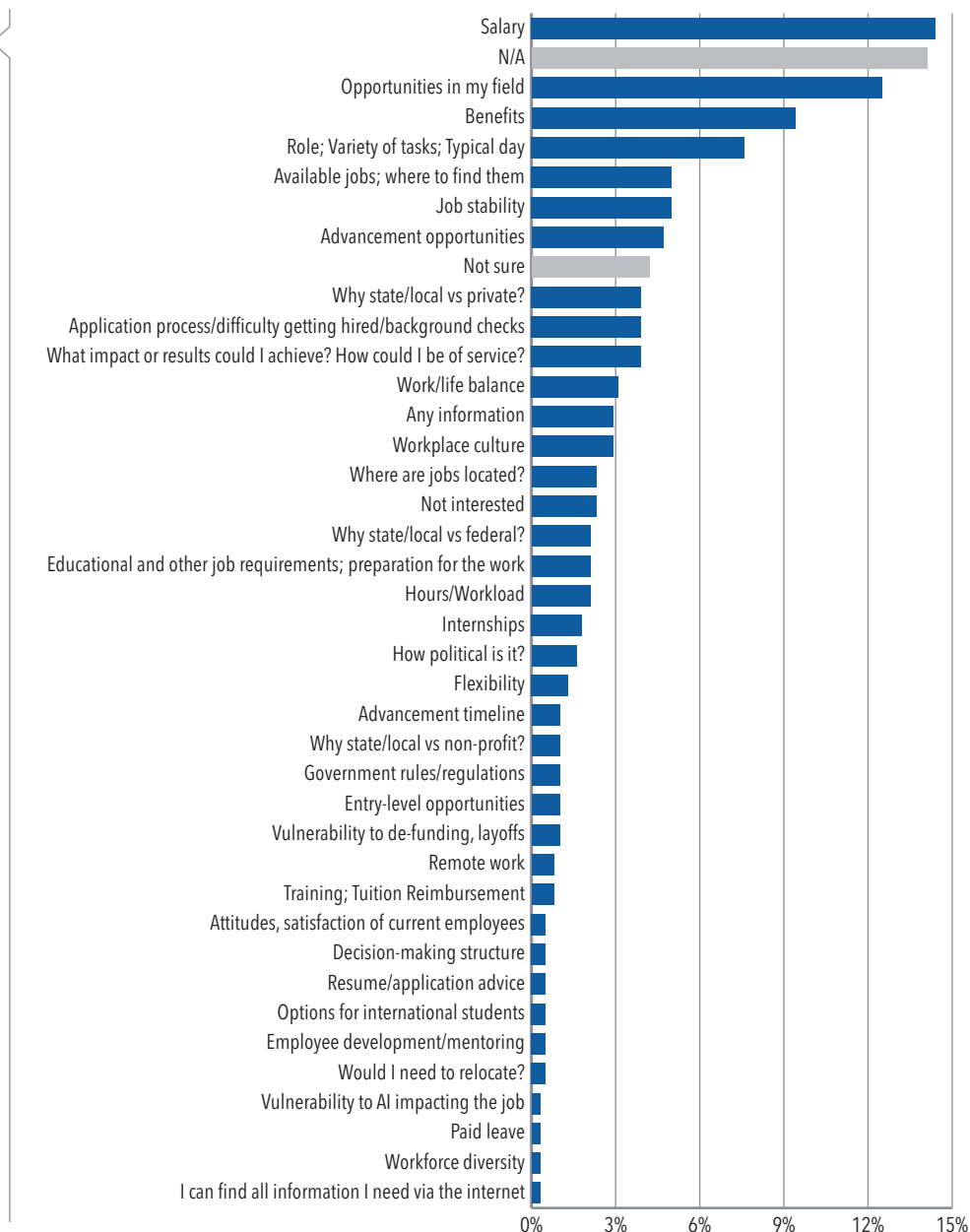


Figure 20: **What information, if any, would you most want to learn about potential jobs in state and local government?** (n = 383)



Among the other topics on which respondents had questions are areas where state or local governments may already have policies in place, but have not necessarily communicated those effectively to an undergraduate audience (e.g., around the separation between political and administrative work, and policies governing civil service protections, veterans preferences, non-discrimination, and remote work).

Perspectives from Students and Practitioners

The quantitative data presented above offers one window into how students develop their attitudes toward public service careers. To provide greater context, several of the comments are pulled out below, along with additional context from related research, perspectives from those working in the field, and advice from those actively working to recruit younger generations to public service. This section of the report is structured so that it can be used as a handout in recruitment planning, college visits, or other outreach.

Student Perspectives on State and Local Government Jobs

With related data and practitioner responses

"Good benefits, good retirement, job security."

- 86% provide a pension (compared to just 14% in the private sector), and 39% provide a 401(k)-style plan.¹⁵
- 73% provide tuition reimbursement or training funds.¹⁶
- 60% of public employees say retirement and health benefits make them more inclined to remain with their employer.¹⁷
- Average state/local government tenure is 5-6 years vs. 3.5 years in the private sector.¹⁸
- The private sector layoff rate is almost 3x the rate for state and local government.¹⁹

"The pay isn't competitive"

About half of state and local governments provided broad-based pay increases in each of the last three years. The average increase was 4-6% in 2023 and 2024, and up to 3% in 2025.²⁰

"How many women/people of color work for [government]?"

More than 60% of state and local governments report that their workforce is reflective of the community by both gender and race/ethnicity.²¹

"What kind of work/life balance is offered?"

- More than 50% offer flexible schedules (e.g., 4 days, 10 hours each) or hybrid work.
- 48% offer paid family leave.²²

"Unstable - mass firings, funding keeps getting cut."

Public services have constituencies who want those services to continue. While I understand people might be deterred by what they hear about mass firings in the federal government, I think things in local governments that are professionally managed, tend to be more stable and incremental. – **Julia D. Novak, CEO/Executive Director, International City/County Management Association**

"How hard is it to get a government job? Do you need to know someone?"

It's very straightforward – job openings are posted, typically requiring an application and maybe an assessment test. You don't have to know someone in order to get hired." – **Cara Woodson Welch, CEO, Public Sector HR Association**

"I don't think I'd want to work for any government. It's just inefficient."

Government has evolved, becoming less bureaucratic, but many people still hold outdated perceptions. To change this, outreach efforts must reflect how people consume information today through mobile apps and social media. Storytelling to highlight efficient service delivery can build trust and shift perceptions from bureaucracy to purpose-driven impact. – **Tony Gardner, Leadership Development Director (Retired), Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia**

"I come from a small town, so the local government is pretty personal in that sense."

Every city that I've worked for has had about 100 employees, and being able to know everybody's name and have that human connection – that's something that I've always enjoyed about local government. You're impacting residents' daily lives. You're making places for them to be able to have recreation... as they drive down a road, there's somebody in local government that made sure that road was there and it was safe, or that traffic signal worked. – **Pam Hylton, Assistant City Manager, Richmond Heights, Missouri**

"What type of work or specific areas does the public sector focus on in terms of computer science?"

We cover a whole gamut of support, engineering, cybersecurity, disaster recovery for the police, water treatment plant operations, finance, and so on. That's what makes our job kind of unique, helping them all work more efficiently. – **Wei Liu, Principal Network and Cybersecurity Engineer, City of Rockville, Maryland**

"Unsure if public sector is up-to-date with private sector technology."

Legacy systems are out there in public service, the same as in the private sector. [My city is] investing in newer systems and technology, improving workflows with AI, doing environmental and stormwater management, electric vehicle charging, solar roofs, and more – all sorts of things that you wouldn't think an IT person would ever get to deal with. And we definitely provide a lot of opportunities for training and advancement. – **Steve Beavers, Manager of Application Development and Enterprise Systems, City of Rockville, Maryland**

Considering a career in public service? College career offices and state and local HR staff can offer advice.

"How can health care workers be utilized in government policy formation?"

In public health, policy intervention is a core function of what we do. That doesn't mean that every staff member does policy work. I think 30% of public health nurses do clinical care. Especially in small departments, they do epidemiology or health education. They're leaders and valued members of the community.

- JP Leider, Associate Professor, University of Minnesota School of Public Health

"I feel like [public sector engineering is] usually associated with terrible work/life balance"; "I think they offer great benefits, but the pay is usually higher in the private sector."

In private engineering consulting, my work/life balance was much more heavily skewed towards work than my current balance in a public sector job. For instance, I used to have a lot of night meetings and worked almost every Saturday. It was also common for me to have client meetings two and a half hours away. Being in the government, my regional area is significantly smaller, so there are a lot of advantages in terms of reduced schedule and stress. My employer really values having skilled, capable staff, and they are willing to pay market rates to have staff who would otherwise work private sector jobs. There's really good compensation, from salary to benefits to time off. - Joel Morgan, Senior Engineer, Kent County, Michigan

"I'd love to help the community, but working for a corrupt system doesn't sound appealing at all."

I wouldn't want to work in a corrupt system either. But I would challenge the perception that the entire system is corrupt. For those in Professional local government is guided by a code of ethics and a declaration of ideals. These require us to behave ethically and to strive to serve all people, regardless of their status or connections. And those who are inside the system have a unique ability to help

make that happen. That's what motivates me: if there's a system that's not working, how do we help fix it? - Julia D. Novak, CEO/Executive Director, International City/County Management Association

"I would like to learn about how there may be advancement within the job itself and where it can take me."

Civil service positions have a structured job description. Jobs may progress in a sequence, but you can also move laterally. Internships work a bit differently; they may rotate through several positions. And once you have gained needed expertise across a number of areas, it can be a fast track into an executive level role. - Erica Manuel, CEO, Institute for Local Government (California)

"It would be nice to work for someone/an organization that contributes to the public needs rather than financial profit."

A lot of job candidates really care about a mission-based work. And the public sector is one of the best places to find that.

- Cara Woodson Welch, CEO, Public Sector HR Association

"I want to pursue a job in forensic accounting... doing it for a state or local government could be a great opportunity and with better work/life balance."

There is definitely the opportunity for better work life balance and competitive pay working for a state, K12, special districts, cities and counties. We don't do a good enough job telling that story. - Chris Morrill, CEO, Government Finance Officers Association

"How do you get finance jobs in state or local government, and what are they looking for in candidates?"

Finance positions are usually hired based on merit. You don't necessarily need all

the technical skills, or a CPA. If you have basic finance knowledge and a good work ethic, you can learn the rest on the job or from professional associations like GFOA. It's also important to be mission driven and want to work in public service. - Chris Morrill, CEO, Government Finance Officers Association

"The pay isn't as good as in the private sector, but there are more benefits."

Sometimes compensation for entry-level public sector positions can be higher than for an entry-level private sector position. Usually, you have better retirement and health insurance benefits in the public sector than you would in the private sector. - Cara Woodson Welch, CEO, PSHRA

"Strikes me as small time and kind of boring"; "Not interested due to the lack of change and repetitiveness."

The things that I work on here are much more complex than what I was doing working for a CPA. With the baby boom generation retiring, I think the growth potential is definitely out there, and faster, probably, than in the private sector. - Maddison Wilkerson, Chief Financial Officer, City of Rock Hill, South Carolina

There are always new challenges to local government. I had an experience where we were building a fire station, and the city manager came to me and said, I need you to manage this project. I found the people to ask the questions, to get the answers, and to figure out how to solve the problems. - Pam Hylton, Assistant City Manager, Richmond Heights, Missouri

Some of the most innovative things we see in the areas of climate or technology, engagement, justice - all of those things are happening at local levels. There's a really direct impact that can happen between communities, and the government that serves them. - Erica Manuel, CEO, Institute for Local Government (California)

Recruitment, Engagement, and Further Research

College Connections and Internships

The pathway to deciding between the public and private sector often starts with academic counselors or instructors. They may discuss all the potential career pathways or reinforce the students' own preconceptions of what options lay before them.

A lot of students don't have any idea that whatever they're studying, there is a job in government that they would be prepared to take on. Relying on a [keyword-driven] search platform may be limiting you to what you think you want. - **Dr. Candice Bodkin, Associate Professor, Georgia Southern University**

I am always looking for ways to inspire engineering and business school students to enter public service careers. A program ASU started 10 years ago called [Next Generation Service Corps](#) is one way of exposing students from these traditional private sector path degree programs to public service. I lead classroom discussions that showcase how local government offers career paths for every major, exposing students to public sector opportunities they hadn't previously considered. - **Kari Kent, Local Government Fellowship Program Director, Arizona State University**

The career services department at Chandler-Gilbert Community College has been very helpful to me. In addition to providing résumé, cover letter, and interview help, they are also the reason I found the partnership between the college and city. - **Lili Valencia, Intern, City of Chandler, Arizona**

For further discussion on internships and apprenticeships, see [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#).

Apprenticeships were most commonly reported in utilities and engineering.

Source: [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#).

Public Service Campaigns

The data from prior studies and this survey as well show that personal satisfaction and the ability to do meaningful work are key drivers for college students seeking employment.

Some public sector employers have responded to that interest by building recruitment videos or branding efforts around the idea of public service. "Be a Part of the City You Love," "Serving Community, Building Careers," and "Choose Purpose" - these are examples of advertising campaigns used by Denver, Minneapolis, and San Francisco to encourage area residents to consider the satisfaction they could achieve with a career in service to their local community.²³

Other Government Outreach

Traditional ads and job fairs are not the only ways to get the message across about government job opportunities. Being an on-site presence in the classroom helps too:

For a number of years, I went to the local high school, and talked about not just the type of job that I do, but all the things that somebody could do as a career in local government, encouraging students to get a diploma, come to work and get on the job training, make a wage that will set you up for a future, and get a pension at the end of it. I also occasionally teach at the University of Missouri, St Louis. I'll talk about my experiences in local government, and my boss, the city manager, she does the same thing. - **Pam Hylton, Assistant City Manager, Richmond Heights, Missouri**

9% of state and local government HR managers report success using skills assessments as an alternative to a degree requirement.

Source: [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#).

Similar linkages can be made via middle school public safety camps (as in [Lenoir County, North Carolina](#)), hackathons to give students hands-on experience developing new government apps, and other "relationship recruiting" that puts a face to public service.²⁴

Further Research

As shown in the data on the highest level of education the students are planning to complete, only 2% indicated that they are pursuing a certificate or associate's degree. To understand career attitudes among that cohort better, it may be necessary to conduct a separate study involving community college students.

In addition, as state and local governments review their educational requirements and other job specifications, many are shifting toward skills-based recruitment. Under this model, it is possible that positions that once required a bachelor's degree could instead more formally recognize alternative acquisition of the requisite skills through prior work experience (in the public, private, nonprofit, or military sectors), demonstration of proficiency, or participation in apprenticeships or other on-the-job upskilling.

The Research Institute's survey of state and local HR managers has noted that degree requirements have been dropped for more than a tenth of all authorized positions by at least 7% of local governments and 36% of state governments. In addition, 18% report hiring below minimum qualifications for post-hiring upskilling. When such alternate pathways account for a larger share of new hires, the methods of evaluating career attitudes may need to evolve further.

Conclusion

Respondents identified several positive aspects of public employment, including benefits, job stability, and the ability to do meaningful work. Their interest in pursuing state or local government work correlates to prior experiences such as in part-time, volunteer, or internship roles, as well as hearing about opportunities through career fairs. Indeed, those who had any prior roles or experiences in state or local government were also less likely to identify it as being a politically, financially, or electorally unstable work environment.

For those looking to recruit undergraduates, however, the greater challenge may be that in all majors studied but engineering, 40-50% of students said they were not even aware that there were state and local government jobs available in their field.

Two-thirds of those participating in this survey have not yet settled on single choice of employment sector, but many already have at least some negative impressions of the public sector. Among those who indicated they foresee working in both the public and private sectors, about twice as many expressed a positive rather than a negative opinion of public sector employment. By contrast, among those who did not identify the public sector as being among their potential career paths, about twice as many expressed a negative rather than a positive opinion.

The good news for employers is that there appears to be a sizeable contingent that is favorable or in the “not sure” persuadable column, and many appear to have not even been aware that there were public sector jobs available in their field. Providing information about the types of jobs available and the workplace culture, as well as allaying concerns about potential political instability, may go a long way toward encouraging students to consider a public sector career path.

Key Takeaways

For state and local governments

When recruiting undergraduates who have already decided on a career path, school career offices or national professional associations can be handy resources, such as on-campus chapters of groups like the American Society of Civil Engineers. But if the desire is to build awareness of public sector opportunities among those still at the K-12 level, the outreach may need to be more personal or local. That may include “shop with a cop” programs, civics curriculum, or even the [Local Government Careers](#) podcast based in Oskaloosa, Iowa. In conducting such outreach, it may be helpful to:

Change the narrative: Emphasize the aspects of personal satisfaction and meaningful work that are among the top career motivations for those open to public sector employment.

Address competitiveness: Discuss the overall compensation package, not just hourly wages. Include salaries, health insurance, retirement benefits, tuition reimbursement, and intangibles like remote work arrangements and job stability.

Counter political stereotypes: Emphasize the organization’s focus on efficiency, innovation, or other goals, while clarifying the separation between electoral politics and day-to-day public service.

Expand outreach: Use campus job fairs, classroom visits, and social media videos to reach students who might not otherwise be aware of available public sector jobs.

Broaden pathways: Identify ways in which hard-to-fill positions may recruit and develop a pipeline of interns or apprentices. Even if some of these programs target high school students, such early efforts could bolster the long-term pool of future applicants. As key as internships and apprenticeships may be to building career awareness, ensure that they are not limited to those with an interest in political science or public administration, but rather are open to those across all educational backgrounds and preferred occupations.

Demonstrate a customer-centric experience: Highlight mobile apps, efforts to reduce time to hire, and the organization’s responsive approach to employee engagement and development. And for those who are unfamiliar with civil service procedures or job descriptions, provide a plain language description focused around the application process, the job’s impact, and opportunities for professional growth.

For academic advisors and campus career offices

Facilitate state/local government and non-profit engagement:

Encountering public service employers in on-campus job fairs, in-class visits, or electronic job boards can help students realize that their career path need not be limited to private sector firms or large metropolitan areas.

Consider partnerships: Internships, apprenticeships, or even spring break-timed programs can give students a sense that government employment is not limited to students in a public administration or public policy track. Or, set longer-term goals, like the three universities partnering with Hamilton, Ontario, on a five-year interdisciplinary student engagement around real world problem solving.²⁵

Think beyond adjunct faculty: A state or local government professional teaching a semester-long class can broaden students’ horizons. But even a single guest lecture or a government-centered class project can help demonstrate the variety of career options available, including those right there in the campus community.

Challenge preconceived ideas: Students may have outdated or incorrect assumptions about job opportunities in public service. Refer to the section above on “Student Perspectives on State and Local Government Jobs” and the responses from government employees and leaders.

For students

Advocate for your own career options: Do not assume that the list of openings on a single job search app represents the extent of the opportunities available. Particularly for those with an interest in meaningful work, talking with academic advisors or career offices may help uncover new and rewarding choices.

Consider an internship: Summer is a great time for an immersive experience in state or local government. The hiring process may be more informal, with opportunities to explore a variety of roles and responsibilities and determine whether public service is the right fit.

Reach out directly to the human resource office in your campus community, hometown, or wherever you’re thinking of setting down roots post-graduation. They may be able to identify specific openings or answer any questions you may have.

Resources

[2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.

[Student Debt in State and Local Government: Impacts on Select Occupations](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2024. (Includes various degrees associated with public sector occupations)

[Student Debt Impacts on Public and Private Sector Employees](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2024.

[35 and Under in the Public Sector: Why Younger Workers Enter and Why They Stay \(or Don't\)](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023.

[Public Finance Workforce Study](#), National Association of State Treasurers, 2021.

LGBTQIA+ inclusion: [CivicPRIDE](#)

Internships, Fellowships, and Apprenticeships:

[New Career Entrants in Public Service: Lessons for Employers from Fellowship Applicants](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023.

[Find Internships and Fellowships](#), International City/County Management Association

[Next Generation Service Corps](#), Arizona State University

Volcker Alliance [Gov-Ramps Aggregator](#)

California Institute for Local Government [Registered Apprenticeship Toolkit](#)

Other ICMA resources:

[Code of Ethics](#), [Council-Manager Form of Government](#), and [Why Consider a Career in Local Government](#)

Endnotes

1. [Workforce of Tomorrow](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2015.
2. [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.
3. “An ‘Unprecedented Leadership Vacuum’ in NYC,” Barrett & Greene, April 9, 2025.
4. For examples of degrees that may align with key public sector occupations, see [Student Debt in State and Local Government: Impacts on Select Occupations](#). Regarding technology, Louisiana State University is recruiting students from a variety of fields to learn cybersecurity skills; see [CIOs Get Serious about Closing the Skills Gap – Mainly from Within](#), CIO, June 2025.
5. [35 and Under in the Public Sector: Why Younger Workers Enter and Why They Stay \(or Don’t\)](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023.
6. [Student Debt Impacts on Public and Private Sector Employees](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2024.
7. [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.
8. Of the total engineering respondents, only two were specializing in nuclear engineering. While this field is not common in smaller governments, as of 2023, 6.7% of all state or local utility power generation was from nuclear sources (see [2025 Public Power Statistical Report](#), American Public Power Association). With the power demands of artificial intelligence data centers, demand for public or private nuclear power is expected to increase considerably (see [Can nuclear power really fuel the rise of AI?](#), MIT Technology Review, May 20, 2025). The only specialties excluded from the summary data for engineering respondents were aerospace and computer hardware engineering.
9. Snapshot Report, IRS Workforce Reductions as of May 2025, U.S. Department of Treasury, Inspector General for Tax Administration, Report Number 2025-IE-R027, July 18, 2025.
10. [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.
11. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), [Employee Tenure in 2024](#), September 2024.
12. [35 and Under in the Public Sector: Why Younger Workers Enter and Why They Stay \(or Don’t\)](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2023.
13. Source: Webinar: [Recruiting the Next Generation to Serve in State Government](#), National Association of State Personnel Executives, June 2025.
14. [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.
15. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), [Retirement benefits: Access, participation, and take-up rates for defined benefit and defined contribution plans](#), March 2025.
16. [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.
17. [Infographic: Public Service Employees’ Financial and Retirement Security](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2024. In addition, 70% of public health employees rated benefits as the top reason to stay with their employer, followed by job stability (57%); see [2024 National Findings: Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey](#), deBeaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, July 2025.
18. BLS, [Median years of tenure with current employer for employed wage and salary workers by industry, selected years, 2014-2024](#), January 2024. [data released every 2 years, so this is the most current source.]
19. BLS, [Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey](#), Seasonally adjusted rates for May 2025: state and local government turnover rate, excluding education: 0.4%; private sector 1.1%. From January-May 2025, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft laid off more than 21,000 workers (see [Leading Companies Announcing Layoffs And Hiring Freezes in 2025](#), Intellizence, viewed July 8, 2025).
20. [2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results](#), MissionSquare Research Institute, 2025.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Government employer branding efforts such as these were discussed in the 2018 report, [Workforce of the Future: Strategies to Manage Change](#) (released under the Research Institute’s former name as the Center for State and Local Government Excellence).
24. For further discussion on relationship recruiting, see [The Model Police Officer: Recruitment, Training, and Community Engagement](#), ICMA, 2018.
25. [Flipping the script on youth engagement](#), Bloomberg Cities Network, March 7, 2025.

About MissionSquare Research Institute

MissionSquare Research Institute identifies and advances best practices in retirement planning, financial wellness, and workforce development strategies to help meet the evolving needs of the public and private sector workforce. Through rigorous, data-driven research, in collaboration with industry leading thought leaders and academics, the Institute delivers actionable insights and innovative strategies that support MissionSquare's broader mission to help all individuals and their families build financial security. For more information and access to research and publications, visit research.missionsq.org.

