

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Office of Career Services

Room 420, International Affairs Building • 420 West 118th Street • New York, NY 10027

Phone: 212-854-4613 • Fax: 212-854-6190 • www.sipa.columbia.edu/ocs

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES ON CAPITOL HILL

Description of the Field

Capitol Hill offers a wide range of exciting and demanding employment opportunities. Employment on the Hill generally refers to positions available in one of the 535 Congressional offices (100 Senate and 435 House of Representatives) or 300 committees and subcommittees. Most committees are divided into majority and minority staffs that perform several different functions including:

Research and subject specialists who conduct legislative research, draft bills, and follow upcoming legislation;

Ombudsmen who respond to constituent inquiries, handle general administration, or promote the public image (and future election) of their representative; and

Committee staff who support the legislative process, by drafting legislation, preparing background reports, arranging for expert testimony, and serving as the liaison between Congress and the administration on policy matters.

Congressional staffers perform a variety of different functions, so there are opportunities for persons with varying interests and capabilities. All Congressional offices need the administrative support personnel as well as public relations staff who may respond to constituent issues and/or promote the elected officer's public image. Many APSIA graduates seek positions as issue specialists, working in the legislative area, conducting research, preparing background reports, drafting bills, following legislation, and arranging for expert testimony.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries

A "typical" career path on Capitol Hill does not exist. With elections every two or six years and with only ten of the current Senators having 25 years or more service, very few staffers are able to spend an entire career working for one member of congress. Many congressional staffers use their congressional positions as stepping-stones to the executive branch, private sector, think tanks, and nonprofit organizations. As turnover is so common on the Hill, opportunities for promotion on both personal and committee staffs are available.

The high turnover rate provides numerous opportunities for enterprising job seekers. Staff size varies considerably and networking is often the key to securing a position, as many openings are highly competitive and are not always advertised. An internship with a Member of Congress also provides an excellent opportunity to build contacts and show interest in public service. A good time to look for a position, particularly on the House side, is just after an election.

Some of the more common entry-level positions include:

Receptionist/Staff Assistant – Serves as the main point of contact for the office, which involves routing incoming calls, distributing messages and mail to staffers, handling constituent requests. Average salaries range in the mid to upper \$20's.

Legislative Correspondent – Drafts responses to a member's mail and deals with a range of constituent requests and inquiries concerning legislation and national policy. Average salaries range in the mid to upper \$20's.

Legislative Assistant – Briefs the Member on a number of issues, helps draft legislation, writes position papers and addresses constituent inquiries. In some offices, Legislative Assistants may handle five or six different issues. Average salaries range from the lower \$30's to the mid \$40's.

Press Secretary/Communications Director – Acts as the key link between the Member of Congress and the media, directs publicity by issuing press releases, radio and TV spots, speeches, etc. Average salaries range from the mid \$40's in the House to the lower \$60's in the Senate.

Legislative Director – Heads the legislative staff, updates the Member on the status of bills in Congress, and maintains close contact with a number of constituencies, including other Hill staffers and lobbyists. Salaries range from the \$50's in the House to the \$80's in the Senate.

Administrative Assistant/Chief of Staff – Oversees the operation of the entire office, both in Washington and in the area represented by the Senator's or Representative's home state. Individuals in this position generally have at least 10 years experience working in Congress. Average salaries range from the \$80's in the House to over \$100,000 in the Senate.

Demand

Entry-level positions are highly competitive and many jobs on Capitol Hill are unadvertised. Inquiries directed to the offices of your own representatives (particularly if you share their party affiliation) can be helpful, as can a Capitol Hill internship. Most congressional staffers will readily admit that networking is frequently the key to securing a position on the Hill. Post-election is a good time to look for a job on the House side. While campaign staffers may fill some positions, newly elected representatives need to staff the Washington office quickly.

Qualifications Necessary to Enter the Field

Entry-level positions require a Bachelor's degree while a Master's is necessary for advancement. Substantive knowledge in areas relevant to a member's committee work and a demonstrated understanding of the legislative process can be helpful in securing a position. Strong written communication skills are essential, and it's important to be able to write concisely and precisely. Oral communication and interpersonal skills are also important in handling constituent problems, meeting with lobbyists and interest groups and dealing with the media. The pace of most Congressional offices requires high energy, commitment and flexibility.

Sample Group of Employers

- Senate Committee on Foreign Relations <http://www.senate.gov/~foreign>
- Senate Select Committee on Intelligence <http://intelligence.senate.gov>
- House Committee on International Relations http://www.house.gov/international_relations
- House Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe <http://www.csce.gov>
- Congressional Research Service <http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo>
- Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov>
- Members' Offices <http://thomas.loc.gov>

Challenges of the Profession

Compensation issues combined with increasing constituent demands, long and unpredictable work hours and a strenuous workload are contributing challenges of this profession.

Resources for Additional Information

Placement Offices

House of Representatives Office of Human Resources
102 Ford House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
Fax – (202) 226-7514

Resume Referral Service - (202) 266-6731
Job Line - (202) 225-2450
<http://www.house.gov>

Senate Placement Office
SH-116, Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510
Phone: (202) 224-9167
Job Line: (202) 228-JOBS
Listings available for pick up each Tuesday, posted online each Friday at <http://www.senate.gov/employment>
<http://www.senate.gov>

Congressional Management Foundation
513 Capitol Court NE, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 546-0100
Fax: (202) 547-0936
E-mail: cmf@cmfweb.org
Publishes an annual survey of House of Representatives' staff job descriptions and salaries.
<http://www.cmfweb.org/>

House Actions Report
C/O Congressional Quarterly Inc.
1255 22nd St, N.W.
Washington, DC 20037
Phone: (202) 547-0421, (800) 423-2250 (toll free)
Resume Fax Line: (202) 419-8740
Email: jobs@cq.com
<http://www.cq.com>

Roll Call
50 F Street NW, Suite 700
Washington DC 20001-1572
Phone: (202)824-6800
Fax (202)824-0475
<http://www.rollcall.com>

Opportunities in Public Affairs
P.O. Box 34949
Bethesda, MD 20827
1-800-315-9777
Fax (434) 984-2331
Email jobs@brubach.com
<http://www.opajobs.com>

Publication Resources Online

Congressional Quarterly (www.cq.com)

Congressional Management Foundation (www.cmfweb.org)

Leadership Directories Inc. (www.leadershipdirectories.com)

Available in the OCS Resource Room

The Book of U.S. Government Jobs: Where They Are, What's Available & How to Get One, 9th edition, by Dennis V. Damp, Brookhaven Press, 2005.