



Advancing Excellence in Governance: Findings from the Exploratory Phase of the Government-to-University Initiative

April 2019

Overview

The Government-to-University (G2U) Initiative is an innovative approach to addressing critical governance challenges by building structured regional networks of governments and universities. G2U will convene public servants at all levels of government with leaders from proximate universities to strengthen the talent pipeline into public service and to promote productive research exchanges. The initiative aims to catalyze a robust local marketplace that can sustainably connect government’s hiring and research needs with local university capacity.

Partnerships between universities and government at all levels—federal, state, and local—can generate substantial benefits in preparing our nation to address complex, urgent challenges. Yet, today, there is a growing disconnect between government needs and university alignment with those needs.

- We are facing an urgent public-sector workforce crisis. While one-quarter of the private sector workforce is under the age of thirty, only seven percent of the federal government workforce is. Federal, state, and local governments are going to see a doubling of the percent of their workforce that is eligible to retire in the next five years. Nearly half of students are interested in government jobs, yet only two percent of NASPAA graduates accept federal government positions.
- The performance of our government institutions depends critically on the training and education of talented public servants. Government practitioners confirm that “reskilling” needs will be increasing with changes in work due to technology. Irrespective of changing technology, public administration curricula have evolved over the years to focus more on the theory of policy and policy-making, rather than the science of governance and implementation.
- The link between academic research and governance is ever more attenuated. Budget constraints and performance demands compel government leaders to use data and analytics to improve effectiveness and efficiency, yet only thirteen percent of top public administration journal articles are focused on specific performance problems in government. This misalignment is exacerbated because tenure and promotion systems at most top universities have tended not to reward “applied research” efforts.

G2U is premised on the hypothesis that structured, intentional partnerships between government practitioners and universities could provide a catalytic response to these high-need areas for



government: access to top talent, workforce preparedness, and support for applied research, predictive analytics, and program evaluation.

To “pressure test” this concept, the Volcker Alliance convened exploratory design sessions in partnership with universities in four sites in 2018: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (October 16-17); Chapel Hill, North Carolina (October 24-25); Kansas City, Missouri (November 14-15); and Austin, Texas (December 5-6). Participants ranged from university professors, career services leaders, deans, and students to government officials from federal agencies, states, counties, cities, and towns. Alliance staff worked closely with university hosts and Federal Executive Board (“FEB”) Directors in each site to engage a diverse range of participants who could speak to the critical issues at hand.

This exploratory phase of the G2U Initiative confirmed the hypothesis in spades: there is an enormous appetite for building sustainable connections between government and universities. What is more, our experience this fall confirmed such collaborations are uniquely positioned to cultivate a vital talent pipeline into the public sector workforce and to ensure answers to government’s top-priority research questions are pursued and delivered.

Below we describe some of the most compelling insights that surfaced during the first phase of the G2U Initiative. From there, we present the expected outcomes and outputs of the work ahead.

G2U Exploratory Phase: Lessons and Insights

The exploratory phase of the G2U Initiative yielded a range of insights and lessons. We have organized our core findings into four central insights.

Insight #1. It is valuable to bring government and university practitioners together. Full stop.

We are connected, but sometimes we’re not connected to the right people.
– Anne Marie Slaughter, President, New America Foundation

Participant feedback strongly suggests there is an opportunity to advance effectiveness in governance by building government-university networks at a regional level. Participants in every site emphatically endorsed the value of routine, structured regional collaboration between local, state, and federal government practitioners with universities’ leadership, faculties, and students. Public sector workforce recruitment and the alignment of research priorities rose to the top as the most productive topics for a regional group to tackle. Below we share some of the most salient written feedback submitted by participants following the sessions:

- What a great session this morning that talked about university-government collaboration! I think the Volcker Alliance is onto something that may impactfully change our field in a few years! I am honored to be part of that conversation, and really look forward to any future initiatives that may come out of it. – Alfred Ho, Professor, University of Kansas



- I heard from a number of participants that they left the sessions feeling inspired and excited to create new and innovative ways to continue to build relationships between universities and government. – *Jackie Speedy, Associate Dean, Carnegie Mellon University*
- I think partnering with our universities would be a great advance for all of us. – *Paul Crews, Director Durham, VA Health Care System*
- We believe there’s enormous opportunity for a very robust regional hub that, in turn, could be a proof-of-concept for a broader initiative. What’s most remarkable is that there is genuine passion among the stakeholders for doing this—and that all of them want to make this happen. It’s strengthening the sinews and nerves and muscle that will give it strength. – *Donald F. Kettl, Professor, University of Texas at Austin*

We learned during the exploratory phase that many of the relationships between government and university practitioners—especially with federal practitioners—were brand new. For example, prior to the G2U session in Pittsburgh, none of the federal government managers had ever been on the Carnegie Mellon campus. At the session, the Associate Dean of the Heinz School and the local FEB Director agreed that the December FEB meeting would be held on campus. The agenda for that FEB meeting included a significant focus on public sector recruiting and internship placements.

Participants in all sites were interested in exploring ways to continue meeting on a sustained basis. Participants appreciated the value of having a “neutral” broker to bring together key players who are not obviously incentivized to sit at the same table, and to structure a working agenda in which mutually beneficial topics and interests are productively pursued. When asked in a survey after the sessions for the most promising ideas discussed for improved government-university collaboration, participants repeatedly emphasized the value of structured interactions:

- *We need some formalized mechanism to keep collaboration in motion.*
- *Intentional creation of inclusive consortia involving government, research and stakeholders including end users.*
- *Suggest defining a process for convening regional government agencies and universities to increase recruitment platforms/awareness campaigns/training.*
- *It would be helpful to meet regularly to continue working on these issues, pipelines. Standing regional G2U collaborative?*
- *Development of a regional collaboration with local government, universities, and others to develop applied research projects.*
- *We should think about backbone organization for intergovernmental convenings.*
- *To ensure sustainability, identify hub/portal with staff support, governance, and funding.*



- *We need an annual summit of federal, state, local, and schools.*
- *Having a trusted intermediary is important to build a bridge between universities and government.*

Insight #2. There is energy and urgency around testing new strategies for recruiting top talent into the public workforce, and a regional forum is a promising place to do so.

In every site, participants enthusiastically developed ideas to help strengthen public sector workforce recruiting. The design sessions devoted to the issue of recruiting were some of the most creative, catalytic, and dynamic sessions in all four sites. Three central themes emerged from the recruitment sessions, all pointing to the power and promise of government and university collaboration to make headway.

The early bird catches the worm

Government recruiting processes tend to commence when a position first opens; attention to early engagement is rare. To be competitive with private sector employers, participants viewed early engagement by government employers with university students to be critical.

A range of promising regional solutions in this regard surfaced during the sessions. For example, in all four sites, increasing the number of government internships was suggested as a way of growing the pipeline of student talent to the public sector workforce. Participants broadly agreed that USAJobs is not a helpful tool for searching for federal jobs or internship opportunities outside of Washington, D.C. There was enthusiasm about the potential of supplemental, regional job boards aggregating employment and internship opportunities across all levels of government in the area. We learned that the Federal Office of Personnel Management has been developing a platform that could be customized for just this type of regional use. After learning about this resource at the Kansas City session, participants are already considering ways to leverage it locally.

Marketing matters

Participants across sites identified incomprehensible government job titles and postings as a deterrent to attracting talented applicants. Participants sorted through ways public sector recruiters might experiment with using more descriptive, modern job titles that capture a position's function, rather than titles that detail rank and do not provide a clear or compelling sense of what the job entails.

Many of these ideas were anchored in collaboration between government and university stakeholders. For example, participants suggested regional collaborators might develop short video content for use in job postings to demonstrate more clearly the day-to-day work involved in a position. Participants wondered whether government hiring managers could partner with universities to test new language to ensure job descriptions are decipherable and compelling to students. There was also enthusiasm around the idea of engaging a professional marketing firm



to explore the kinds of content and messaging that resonate most with potential job applicants in a university setting and sharing the lessons learned.

Making the pocketbook pitch

Although the public-private compensation gap remains a formidable obstacle to recruiting top talent, participants across sites discussed the importance of conveying to students that compensation is about much more than salary. Not only is there the “priceless” value of participating in work that improves lives—“mission impact”—but government employment also comes with a range of quantifiable benefits, including robust health insurance, loan forgiveness, retirement incentives, vacation and leave opportunities, and on-site perks such as gyms and childcare. Participants across sites thought it would be valuable to document and quantify the range of government employment benefits more concretely—with specific attention given to the process and eligibility requirements of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program—so that university career professionals can more effectively describe them to students.

Insight #3. There is palpable energy around the concept of developing a regional collaborative to connect government’s most pressing research needs with student and faculty research capacity at universities.

Today, there is no systematic “marketplace” for government to identify its research needs and for universities and other capable partners to respond. Although there are examples of productive government-university research partnerships around the country, many tend to be relationship-driven and ad hoc. Others are dependent upon deep philanthropic investment.

An unfortunate misalignment of incentives contributes to this problem. Government typically requires answers quickly. University faculty are rewarded for developing peer-reviewed publications, rather than applied research to drive administrative decision-making. In all levels of government and across jurisdictional lines, there are formidable market barriers to effective collaboration, including cumbersome procurement regulations, confidentiality concerns, data sharing limitations, and resource constraints.

In response, in all four G2U research sessions, participants envisioned a new model that would help bridge these gaps and facilitate the delivery of priority government research: a regional network of universities and government stakeholders.

A regional network would systematically bring together research needs (demand) and university capacity (supply). Participants envisioned the collaboration developing a discrete set of research priorities that reflect pressing challenges faced by government. With clear priorities articulated, universities would develop an array of research strategies to advance them. A collaborative would be positioned to break down standing market barriers and create economies of scale in key areas such as data sharing, data maintenance, and dissemination of findings. It would enable



government to reach out to universities for smaller-scale, “micro-sprint” data and research projects that might otherwise not merit the cumbersome process of contracting.

Importantly, participants appreciated the potential for this kind of research collaborative to engage students, meaningfully exposing them to a range of critical governance challenges—fostering interest in public sector careers and building needed practical skills.

In all sites, participants appreciated a need for a neutral intermediary to help convene the right stakeholders and productively manage the process.

When thinking about what success might look like, G2U participants described a regional research collaborative that would:

- Enable collective, thoughtful prioritization of the problems most in need of new solutions;
- Inspire and prepare students to succeed in the public workforce;
- Bring in the best minds in the region—across disciplines and experience—to address intractable management problems and make government systems run better;
- Reduce reliance on one-off engagements that can be expensive and non-transferable or replicable across agencies and instead develop trusted, lasting partnerships between organizations;
- Save money and time in the pursuit of data-driven, smart governance; and
- Most importantly, offer better service to citizens.

Insight #4. The sessions dedicated to workforce preparedness confirmed the imperative and challenge of building “soft skills” to succeed in government management positions.

We entered the exploratory phase of G2U with the hope that we would uncover promising strategies around addressing standing “skill gaps”—*i.e.*, ways to ensure the public sector workforce is prepared to deliver on the skills government most needs to be effective. Although the “skills” sessions resulted in energetic discussions among participants, few concrete, actionable strategies emerged.

These conversations confirmed, however, the imperative and challenge of building “soft” skill sets needed to succeed in government, such as critical reasoning, adaptability, and managing a team. A common theme emerged around the promise of blending critical hard and soft skills in the same course curriculum. For example, what if a course on budgeting and finance included an emphasis on how to communicate budgetary issues to legislators? Similarly, what if a critical element of a predictive data analytics course was to explore effective strategies for presenting quantitative findings to a range of audiences, including citizens?

There is also a range of promising experiential learning programs; it may be valuable to learn more about how these operate and share effective approaches across jurisdictional lines.



Participants in all sites stressed the importance of finding ways to integrate practitioners into the student experience. Ideas surfaced around engagement of government speakers as guest lecturers, mentorship opportunities, and intentional collaborations on curriculum development.

Looking Ahead: Establishing G2U Regional Councils

To harness the momentum that came out of the G2U exploratory phase, the Volcker Alliance will launch a cohort of three to five G2U Regional Councils in 2019 and 2020. The first two G2U Regional Council sites will be in Kansas City and Austin.

Each G2U Regional Council will solidify a network of federal, state, and local government practitioners, alongside key faculty and administrators from proximate universities. Governed by a written charter, the Regional Councils will identify and pursue opportunities to better prepare and strengthen the pipeline of talent from local universities into government and explore approaches to systematizing research exchanges focused on solving pressing government operational and management issues. The Councils themselves will provide a platform to build new relationships and strengthen existing ones among government and university practitioners at the regional level.

The Volcker Alliance will serve as the “hub” of the initiative, “scaffolding” the cohort of Regional Councils during an 18-month period, with the aim of building the foundation for sustainability over the long term. The Alliance will manage myriad workstreams to ensure productive collaboration in each of the G2U regions and capture replicable lessons and strategies across the initiative writ large.

We expect a successful G2U Regional Council will accomplish the following:

- Boost the placement of top university graduates into employment in government agencies;
- Increase the number and relevance of research projects to advance government effectiveness;
- Increase the confidence of current government employees that their agencies are recruiting public servants with the right skills;
- Increase the interest in government jobs and understanding of government hiring processes by university students;
- Facilitate intergovernmental collaboration on shared priorities; and
- Contribute to policy changes in hiring protocols or public management in a manner informed by on-the-ground practice.

The Volcker Alliance team welcomes government, university, or civic leaders interested in exploring a G2U site in their region to contact Peter Morrissey at pmorrissey@volckeralliance.org or Yesenia Martinez at ymartinez@volckeralliance.org to learn more.