



SURVEYING AMERICA'S LEADERSHIP

A Study of the White House Fellows

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About the White House Fellows Project

Great ideas are often born in unsettled times. In the midst of the tumult of the mid-1960s, Carnegie Corporation President John Gardner approached one of President Lyndon B. Johnson's trusted aides with an idea for engaging talented young Americans for civic leadership. At the time, Johnson was increasingly concerned about the disaffection between youth and government. According to Gardner, the idea was "straightforward":

"Each year a presidential commission would select a handful of outstanding young men and women to come to Washington and participate in government at the highest levels. As special assistants to key officials in the Executive Branch, the fellows would learn the workings of the federal government. We believed they would also learn a great deal about leadership as they saw the nation's leaders at work and met with leaders from other parts of society. We hoped the program would strengthen the Fellows' abilities and desires to contribute to their communities, their professions and the country."

Since its establishment in 1964, the White House Fellows Program has been the nation's most prestigious and competitive fellowship for early-career leaders, providing them with an unmatched opportunity to work with officials at the highest levels of government. The nonpartisan, year-long program assigns 12-19 exceptional people to work as senior aides to top government officials such as the president, the first lady, the vice president, a cabinet secretary, or a member of the White House staff. This governmental official supervises and ideally mentors the Fellow and is known as the Fellow's "principal." Often Fellows attend meetings and travel with their principal, working on special projects in the office, department, or agency where they serve.

Beyond assisting their principal, Fellows participate in an educational program that enhances their Fellowship experience. The education consists of seminars twice a week and several week-long trips to explore policy issues, both domestically and abroad. Speaker seminars take the form of round-table discussions through which Fellows gain access to a number of prominent leaders, including the president, cabinet secretaries, and Supreme Court justices. Over the course of the Fellowship year, Fellows meet with close to 100 of our nation's top leaders in fields such as business, the arts, science, media, and government.

The program has three main objectives: 1) to expose exceptional young Americans to the inner workings of the federal government at the highest level, 2) to provide a first-class educational program for future American leaders, who then return to their communities with greater policy knowledge and leadership acumen, and 3) to create a reservoir of young men and women who are qualified for and interested in public leadership—that is, leaders for the American public, whether that be in politics, business, the arts, nonprofit life, or another field. To this day, over 625 Fellows have served in a variety of roles as part of their year-long Fellowship. The number of applicants each year has ranged from 400 to 3,100. From these, approximately 100 regional finalists are selected for two-day interviews that take place in eight cities across the country. That group, in turn, is culled to approximately 30 national finalists, who interview with the President's Commission on White House Fellowships. Eventually, fewer than 20 of these finalists are selected as the next year's class of White House Fellows.

Given the competitiveness of the program, few doubt that the selected Fellows are talented individuals with great potential. And these individuals, among the best and most qualified in the nation, are clearly given a firsthand experience of government at the highest of levels. But has the program achieved its lofty goals of enlisting the most capable of our country for a lifetime of civic service and leadership? Does it develop leaders for the nation? And has it helped the federal government, and by extension, the American people? Questions like these have motivated this study.

Now for the first time in the program's history, we have produced a systematic analysis of the White House Fellows Program, its participants, and its impact on American democracy. In the fall of 2008, Professor D. Michael Lindsay launched a study that included a 72-question survey of living Fellows that explored three areas: 1) what Fellows were like before the Fellowship and how



(WHFP Report.pdf)
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Quotes

"A genuinely free society cannot be a spectator society... Freedom, in its deepest sense, requires participation—full, zestful, knowledgeable participation. Toward that end, I have today established a new program entitled the White House Fellows."

Lyndon B. Johnson
October 3, 1964

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they learned about the program, 2) what the Fellowship experience meant to them (personally and professionally) and how it has affected their life since, and 3) the Fellows' background, attitudes, and experiences and how they compare to those of the general population. Fellows had the option of completing the paper questionnaire (which was mailed to their homes), answering the survey questions online, or scheduling a telephone appointment. The survey packet included letters of support from the director of the President's Commission on White House Fellowships and the president of the White House Fellows Foundation and Association. With this set of strategies, the survey achieved a 78% response rate among the program's 627 living Fellows (N=473). Survey responses were supplemented with semi-structured interviews conducted by Dr. Lindsay with the 2008-2009 Class of Fellows in December of 2008. Additional information was obtained on all 627 Fellows using biographical sketches from the brochures created for each new class of Fellows, information provided by the Foundation and Association, and online databases.