



# SFS Student Toolkit

A Guide to Understanding the SFS Program



**Service Cyber Corps**



## Overview

This Toolkit is intended to help students to better understand the Federal Cyber Service: Scholarship For Service (SFS) program and its requirements. It will explain how to successfully seek Federal internship and employment opportunities and provide tips on how to write a resume and prepare for an interview.

## Make a Difference Through Civil Service

Civil service is a demanding, yet rewarding career.

With over 1.8 million employees, the Federal government is the nation's largest employer. Within the next five years, however, half of these employees may be eligible for retirement. Therefore, dozens of government agencies—from small independent agencies like the Federal Election Commission to larger cabinet-level agencies like the Department of Health and Human Services—are looking for smart and enthusiastic people to join their teams. For the Federal government to be efficient and effective, it needs the best and the brightest employees who want to serve the nation by sharing their knowledge, skills, and energy. The contributions Federal employees make today, tomorrow, and in the future help ensure that America remains the world leader and can successfully respond to the foreign and domestic challenges of the 21st century.

The work that government employees do has an impact on the life of every American. As a government employee you can play a vital role in addressing pressing issues, from health care to homeland security.

Want proof that you will make a difference? Just ask the men and women who serve their country every day. They will tell you that their careers in public service are stimulating and professionally satisfying. They enjoy competitive salaries and generous employee and "family-friendly" benefits. One of the most significant advantages of a career working for the Federal government is that career training and development are part of the professional culture within the Federal workforce and there are real opportunities for advancement. There's also the satisfaction that comes from knowing that you are making a difference. The career opportunities available to you as a Federal employee are endless. Once on board, the track you take and how far you go depends entirely upon you.

**Additional information on working for the Federal government can be found at the following websites:**

Partnership for Public Service  
(<http://www.ourpublicservice.org/>)

Best Places to Work for the Federal government  
(<http://www.bestplacetowork.org/>)

Work for the Government  
([http://www.firstgov.gov/citizen/topics/work\\_for\\_the\\_government.shtml](http://www.firstgov.gov/citizen/topics/work_for_the_government.shtml))

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## SFS FAQs for Students

### **SFS goals**

Focused on cyber security education, the CyberCorps: Scholarship For Service ([www.sfs.opm.gov](http://www.sfs.opm.gov)) program gives students scholarship funds in exchange for service in the federal government for a period equivalent to the length of the scholarship, typically two-three years. As a result of the CyberCorps program, federal agencies are able to select from a highly qualified pool of student applicants for internships and permanent positions in Cyber Security.

### **What agency administers the SFS program?**

The SFS program, offered by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and co-sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), includes scholarship and capacity-building components that attract high-caliber students from institutions designated by the National Security Agency (NSA) and DHS as Centers of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance Education (CAE/IAE) and selected by NSF through a competitive process.

### **Can any college or university participate?**

No. Colleges and universities are selected by NSF through a competitive process. In order to compete, they must be designated by NSA and DHS as a CAE/IAE or have a program deemed "equivalent" to CAE/IAEs.

Only those CAE/IAEs selected through the NSF's competitive process may participate.

**Who pays for the scholarships?**

NSF awards grants for the scholarships to selected colleges and universities.

**What costs are covered by the SFS program?**

Universities individually manage the funding portion of their grant. The scholarship could cover all or part of tuition, room and board, and books for up to two years of undergraduate-, graduate-, or doctoral-level study. For specific scholarship coverage, contact the university in which you are interested. In addition, undergraduates receive an annual stipend of \$22,500. The annual stipend for graduate students is \$34,000.

**When, and for how long, can a student get a scholarship?**

Students are funded up to three years, typically during their senior year and final two years graduate studies.

**What is the shortest period for which a student may be funded?**

One semester. It would be during the final semester of graduate studies in Cybersecurity.

**Are students entitled to the full stipend during a year in which they are funded for less than a year?**

No. The student is entitled to a prorated amount.

**How long must a student serve at a Federal agency?**

A student must serve for a period equivalent to the length of the scholarship or one year, whichever is longer. An academic year (i.e., the fall and spring semesters) is equivalent to a calendar year of employment. If the student is funded for two academic years, he or she must serve at a Federal agency in a covered position for two calendar years. If the student is funded for one academic year or less (e.g., only one semester), he or she must serve for one calendar year.

**How are students selected for the program?**

Students must apply to the program through a participating university. Students will be selected for the program in accordance with the process and screening criteria set forth by the participating university. There is a strict and highly competitive application process for students to be selected into the SFS program. Each university develops its own competitive criteria for selection. Principal Investigators (PIs), who serve as the SFS program leaders at each university, are responsible for reviewing all applications and selection of candidates. OPM follows with a final review and selected applicants are then notified.

## **What are the student eligibility requirements?**

Students participating in the SFS program must be:

- a) Enrolled in the final of a bachelor's or have graduated and pursue a master's or doctorate degree at an NSF selected CAR/IAE;
- b) Attending school on a full-time basis while receiving a scholarship under the SFS program;
- c) A United States citizen;
- d) Eligible for Federal employment; and
- e) Able to obtain a security clearance, if necessary.

Students are selected to participate in the SFS program based on merit, evidence of intensive academic training in the information assurance field, and clear indicators they can apply their education to real-world work experiences.

## **What is the process for “matching” students with Federal agencies?**

A match occurs when a student receives an offer from an agency. To facilitate the matching process, students are required to register on the [SFS program website](http://www.sfs.opm.gov) (www.sfs.opm.gov) and complete a resume online. Through the [SFS](http://www.sfs.opm.gov) website, they are able to search for, and contact, participating agencies to explore internship and long-term placement opportunities. Federal agencies are strongly encouraged to register on the SFS website to conduct student and resume searches. Once registered, Federal agency officials gain full access to the SFS website where they may view, download, and/or print resumes of participating students available for internships and post-graduation placement. All resumes may be retrieved based on different search criteria such as employment availability date or degree program. Once they view and download resumes, agency officials can contact students directly for the purpose of facilitating student/agency (i.e., to explore making internship or post-graduation placement offers). When a match is made, this website allows the agency to report the match to the SFS Program Office.

## **Why is it important that offers be made early?**

Early offers allow more time for getting security clearances processed if needed.

## **After an offer is received, what is the next step?**

After the offer is made, the student is required to send an e-mail to the SFS Program Office stating he or she has accepted the position and provide contact information (name, position, e-mail, and phone number) for a representative from the hiring agency.

### **Are Federal internship and employment opportunities only available in Washington, D.C.?**

No. Although the majority are in the Washington, D.C. area, there are opportunities available throughout the United States.

### **Where can I serve my internship and post-graduation service commitment?**

At any Federal Agency, Independent Agency, Government Corporation, Commission, or Quasi-Official Agency.

See <http://www.firstgov.gov/Agencies.shtml> for a list of organizations.

Students may also serve at a National Laboratory or Federally Funded Research Development Center (FFRDC).

See [http://www.energy.gov/engine/content.do?BT\\_CODE=OF\\_NLTC](http://www.energy.gov/engine/content.do?BT_CODE=OF_NLTC) for a list of National Laboratories. See <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf05306/> for a list of FFRDCs.

Each organization on this list is limited to five internship hires and five post-graduation hires per year and must provide the Program Office with a statement verifying that the student will work exclusively on government-related projects in Information Assurance. Other placements may be approved at the discretion of the Program Office.



## **Where and how can students search for Federal internship and agency employment vacancies?**

Federal agencies are not required to post their student opportunities in one central place, so finding specific internships can get a little tricky.

Students are encouraged to visit and register at [USAJOBS](http://www.usajobs.gov/) (<http://www.usajobs.gov/>)—the Federal government’s official jobs site and the [Studentjobs.gov](http://www.studentjobs.gov/) (<http://www.studentjobs.gov/>) website for information regarding Federal internship and employment opportunities. On these web sites, students can access current job vacancies, employment information fact sheets, applications and forms, and in some instances, apply for jobs online. Students will also be able to search internship and employment vacancies by category, state, and by Federal agency name.

Additionally, individual agencies also have websites that offer internship and permanent placement opportunities. (e.g. [FBI](http://www.fbijobs.gov/)-[www.fbijobs.gov](http://www.fbijobs.gov/))

**NOTE: It is important to remember that not all Federal agencies are required to post their student internship or employment opportunities at the USAJOBS and/or Studentjobs.gov websites. Therefore it is highly recommended that students directly visit the websites of each Federal agency in which they are interested to obtain updated information regarding their specific internship or employment opportunities.**

If students are unable to find the information they are seeking online, they may call the agency they are interested in and ask to speak with someone in charge of the internship program. This person should be able to provide them with information about available positions and descriptions of intern duties.

## **Are students required to serve internships, and how long must the internship last?**

Yes. Students funded more than one year are required to serve an internship at a Federal agency. The internship must be at least 10 weeks in length and will normally occur during the intervening summer. The internship is intended to enhance the student's cybersecurity knowledge by exposing them to worthwhile cybersecurity related work experiences.

**Can students apply their internship time towards fulfilling their post-graduate Federal agency obligations?**

No. A student's time spent in an internship cannot be credited towards the post-graduate commitment.

**Does the student have to serve the internship at the Federal agency that will employ him or her upon graduation?**

No. As long as the nature of the internship meets the SFS program requirements, a student may serve his or her internship at an agency different from the one he or she targets for full-time time work following graduation. However, it is strongly encouraged that the internship be served at the agency that will ultimately hire the student as the internship provides the environment that helps create a bond between the student and the employer. It also helps create a sense of belonging, of being a part of that agency's cadre of information assurance professionals. More importantly, the summer internship should be an integral part of a mentoring process that should span throughout the entire academic and employment phases of the program.

**What happens if a student receives more than one offer for either the internship or their post-graduation commitment?**

If a student receives more than one offer for an internship or post-graduation employment it is up to the student which offer to accept provided that offer is from an approved employer and the duties of the position are in Information Assurance. However, if the student receives an offer and fails to accept it because he or she is expecting better offers to come at a later date and the offer(s) expected does not materialize, it will constitute a breach of the service agreement. In these situations, the SFS Program Office will seek the remedial action that best serves the objectives of the SFS program and the interests of the government.

**May an agency make an offer of employment to a student who served the internship at another agency?**

There is no legal or regulatory basis to prevent an agency from making an offer of employment to a student who served the internship at another Federal agency even if the student is currently on the latter's rolls.

## **What is the typical starting salary for someone graduating from this program?**

The grade level at which you will be appointed depends on your qualifications at the time of appointment. In general, students with a bachelor's degree and superior academic achievement may be appointed at the GS-7 level. Master's degree recipients may be appointed at the GS-9 level. Recipients of a doctorate degree may be appointed at the GS-11 level. It is important to note that the pay rates for information technology professionals are higher than for other jobs and pay rates may also differ based on geographic location.

## **What happens if the student leaves his Federal position before he or she serves the required period?**

The student must repay a prorated amount equivalent to the length of the period not served. For example, if the student received funds for two years and serves for one-and-a-half years, he or she must repay 25% of the funds received. Federal agencies must notify the SFS Program Office immediately when this occurs. The SFS Program Office is responsible for initiating the repayment process.

## **Does the SFS program pay for or conduct any type of security background investigation on SFS students?**

No. The SFS Program Office, does not conduct any type of security background investigation on SFS students. It is the responsibility of the agency to initiate and conduct whatever security clearance/investigation or background check needed to determine suitability for employment with that agency. In addition, the Federal agency will bear the cost of the background investigation (if needed), case adjudication, and other expenses associated with obtaining the required level of security clearance.

## **Where can I obtain additional information regarding the SFS program?**

Additional information and questions regarding the SFS program can be answered by visiting the [SFS](http://www.sfs.opm.gov) website ([www.sfs.opm.gov](http://www.sfs.opm.gov)) or by contacting

Kathy Roberson, SFS Program Manager,  
at [kathy.roberson@opm.gov](mailto:kathy.roberson@opm.gov) or (210) 805-2423, extension 506.

In addition, the SFS Program Director can be reached at  
[sfs@nsf.gov](mailto:sfs@nsf.gov) or (703) 292-8669.

## Tips for Writing a Government Resume

A government resume must present information quickly, clearly, and in a way that makes your experience relevant to the position in question. That means condensing your information down to its most powerful form. The following are a few useful tips to be kept in mind while designing a government resume.

### **Focus on the following areas:**

- Skills
- Areas of expertise
- Certifications
- Accomplishments

### **Job Objective:**

Have a clear job target as you develop your government resume. Create a brief headline that encapsulates your career goal and one or two of your top qualifications.

### **Summarize:**

Summarize your strengths and key qualifications within the top half of the first page of the resume under sections like "Professional Profile" and "Areas of Expertise" listing keywords that are pertinent to your career choice. Also include your industry certifications and licenses.

### **Emphasize your accomplishments:**

Describe your basic job responsibilities, followed by a bulleted list of accomplishments. Show quantifiable results of your work.

### **Remember:**

- Adapt your resume for the specific position for which you are applying.
- Demonstrate your strengths in the resume through job experiences, academic background, or volunteer/community activities. Always put your best selling points first. Do not misrepresent yourself or exaggerate; employers do check information.
- Keep it short, concise, and clear.
  
- Make it easy to read. Avoid a cluttered look. Leave spaces between sections. Use headings to organize the details. Eliminate irrelevant information and re-write until you think it is succinct and accurate.

- Instead of long, dense paragraphs distill the matter by creating bulleted, indented, focused statements. Short, powerful lines show the reader, in a glance, exactly why they should keep reading.
- Connect your skills to your job history.
- Use the keywords pertinent to your job profile.
- Use action verbs when constructing your statements

**Tip:**

There is a tremendously helpful document found on the University of Idaho website that provides additional resume-building detail. The direct link is [www.cs.uidaho.edu/sfs/fed\\_cv.pdf](http://www.cs.uidaho.edu/sfs/fed_cv.pdf).

## Tips for Writing a Technical Resume

Technical resumes are more targeted towards the IT field. These resumes list software programs, hardware, and operating systems that you are familiar with. Technical resumes would also, in a specialty field, highlight the certifications and specific skills you possess. These specific skills must be listed to ensure they are picked up by the scanning software. Skills are exactly what employers are looking for in technical resumes. These resumes vary in length based on specific experience.

Technical resumes differ from other types of resumes because they require that you include a technical proficiency section that highlights hardware, software, operating systems or engineering tools so that a potential employer can easily pick out applicable job skills. Not only does the technical resume outline your experience in implementing, upgrading and managing systems, but it also highlights how your contributions streamlined and improved company operations.

The trickiest aspect of technical resume writing is that the resume writer must be able to describe their technical abilities without confusing potential employers. Many professionals who need a technical resume have a difficult time because they use too much industry jargon in their resumes. You must keep in mind that a human resources manager will probably be the first person to view your resume, not a tech savvy engineer. You must be able to translate your expertise into layman's terms.

Remember, technical doesn't always mean hard to understand; therefore it's critically important that you strike the delicate balance of describing your technical skills without baffling future employers with jargon.

Helpful resources on how to write a technical resume can be found at [Technical-Resumes.com](http://www.technical-resumes.com) (<http://www.technical-resumes.com/guide.html>) and [e-resume.net](http://www.e-resume.net) (<http://www.e-resume.net/resources/index.html>).

## Tips for Writing a Cover Letter

Cover letters are used as effective means of introduction. When mailing your resume, it should always be accompanied by a targeted cover letter. Many employers use cover letters as screening devices. While your resume conveys general qualifications for a particular field or occupation, a cover letter states your specific skills and interest for the position at hand.

You should personalize and target each cover letter. Address your correspondence to a particular person and include his or her title. Form letters, addressed "Dear Madam or Sir:" are far less impressive than personalized letters.

In the first paragraph, clearly state the purpose of your letter. Mention your interest and briefly state your enthusiasm or qualifications for the position.

In the body of your letter, indicate what you can do for the employer. Try to determine the skills required for the position and then describe your ability to perform the responsibilities by providing examples from your background. A job advertisement often includes the desired traits.

### Example:

*As outlined in your recent job announcement, you seek a professional with strong written and verbal communication skills. As you will note from the enclosed resume, I have three years of experience in developing written and oral reports as an officer in the student chapter of the American Marketing Association. This experience, combined with my enthusiasm for sales, will prove beneficial in the position that you have advertised.*

Be sure that your cover letter augments the information provided by your resume. Many job seekers erroneously use the cover letter to repeat the same information that can be found on the resume. The cover letter should be used to provide details or to explain particular experiences and/or achievements related to the available position.

In the closing paragraph, restate your interest and (a) request an interview, indicating that you will call to arrange a convenient time for an appointment; (b) request application materials; or (c) indicate that you will wait for their response.

Additional information on writing a cover letter can be found at [CollegeGrad.com](http://www.collegegrad.com/coverletters/) (<http://www.collegegrad.com/coverletters/>).

## Tips for Telephone Interviews

In an effort to save on time and expenses, some employers will conduct screening interviews by phone. Since you may expect calls from employers at any time, it is important for you to have a reliable answering machine or voice mail with a professional message; employers are not usually entertained by quirky messages or long music interludes.

Many job candidates find telephone interviews more difficult than personal interviews because you will not receive any nonverbal feedback to help you gauge your responses. You should prepare for the telephone interview with the same diligence as you would for a person-to-person interview.

When the secretary or interviewer calls to arrange the telephone interview, be sure to ask for basic information if it is not offered: who will be conducting the interview, name and title (ask for spelling of name if you are unsure; again this information is valuable for your follow-up) and ask for the projected length of the interview so that you may make appropriate arrangements.

As you prepare for the interview, make sure your room is void of noise and other distractions. Try sitting at a desk or table with your resume in front of you for easy reference. Good posture will help you project a professional tone on the telephone. You should also keep a note pad and pen nearby to jot down any ideas or questions that may come to mind.

Again, be prepared with questions and end your interview with a statement expressing your interest in the position. It is advisable to follow-up with a thank you letter within 24 hours after the telephone interview.

Additional information on how to prepare for a phone interview can be found at [CollegeGrad.com](http://www.collegegrad.com/jobsearch/18-0.shtml) (<http://www.collegegrad.com/jobsearch/18-0.shtml>).



# Tips for Face-to-Face Interviews

## Making a Good First Impression

As cliché as it may sound, you will not get a second chance to make a first impression when it comes to interviews. Your nonverbal skills and the manner in which you present yourself will be evaluated in addition to your verbal responses to interview questions.

Be sure to arrive for your interview 10-15 minutes early. This will provide you with time to check your appearance and collect your thoughts prior to the interview. Be sure to greet the receptionist, secretary or others in the office in a friendly and courteous manner. These employees often have some influence in the hiring process.

As you are waiting on the interviewer to greet you, be sure to position yourself so that you have a good view of the hall or reception area from which you expect the employer to enter. You do not want to have your back facing the employer when he/she enters the room. When the employer greets you, be sure to stand and offer a firm handshake. Look the employer in the eyes and offer a return greeting similar to, "Nice to meet you." If the employer mispronounces your name, clearly state your name as you shake his or her hand. The only thing that you should be carrying is a portfolio with paper and pen; leave your coat and book bag (if you are interviewing on campus) in the waiting area unless otherwise instructed. You are always encouraged to take an extra copy of your resume with you for all interviews. For on-site interviews, women may also carry a small, professional-looking purse.

As you enter the interview room, wait for the employer to indicate where you should be seated. After the employer is seated, it is your cue to also take a seat. During the interview, remember to practice good nonverbal skills:

- Sit up straight with your shoulders back and hands resting in your lap.
- Place both feet on the floor.
- Look the employer in the eye when you are talking to demonstrate interest and enthusiasm.
- Use the employer's name, pronounce it correctly.
- Try to smile when responding to questions (when appropriate); a smile will indicate confidence and enthusiasm.
- Speak clearly; don't mumble.

- If you need time to think before answering, take time. Stick to the subject at hand, which is the job and your skills related to it.
- Use limited hand gestures to emphasize key points.
- Don't fidget in your seat and otherwise show nervousness with your body (hands, posture, etc.). Be aware of nervous movements such as tapping of your foot or playing with a ring.
- Don't complain about a former boss or co-worker. By complaining in this way, you're likely to make the employer think that you are hard to get along with.
- Don't ask about salaries, sick leaves, pensions, vacations, or benefits on the first interview.
- Don't exaggerate; state the facts.
- Try to relax; you will find that you are better able to respond to questions if you simply relax a little.
- If you have specific qualifications for a job, be sure the employer knows about them. No one knows what you can do unless you tell him or her.
- Talk about school subjects and hobbies that you have done well in and which are related to the job for which you are applying.
- An employer may be interested in everything you can do, but will be most interested in your skills that relate to the job for which you are applying.
- Ask questions when you don't understand what the employer is talking about. You'll want to know as much about the job as you can and asking questions is the best way to find out.
- The interviewer will close when he or she has enough information—don't try to extend the interview unless you have an important point which has not been covered—then cover it, but make it brief.
- Before leaving the interview (assuming you want the position), let the employer know that you really want the job. By doing this, the employer will feel that you will work hard and that you will want to stay on the job.

Additional information on how to prepare for face-to-face interviews can be found at [CollegeGrad.com](http://www.collegegrad.com) (<http://www.collegegrad.com/jobsearch/16-0.shtml>).

# Tips on How to Dress for Face-to-Face Interviews

## Interview Attire

The way in which you dress for your interview will tell the employer about your professional savvy and, in some cases, will be one of the factors an employer will take into account in evaluating you as a candidate. Your ability to “dress the part” speaks to your knowledge of the industry and interest in “fitting in.” Also, by dressing professionally, you will appear more mature and seasoned; this will aid you as you may be competing with older individuals with more experience. Understand that you will probably dress more professionally for an interview than may be required once you begin working in that environment.

## Men AND Women

- Two-piece business suit (navy or other dark color).
- Consistent look: avoid wearing a business suit with sandals or sneakers.
- Well-groomed hair: avoid unusual styles or colors.
- Minimal cologne or perfume.
- No visible body art: cover tattoos with clothing if possible.
- Breath mints; use one before greeting the recruiter.
- No visible body piercing(s) (other than earrings for women).

## Men

- Long-sleeved oxford cloth shirt in white or light blue.
- Conservative necktie in terms of color and pattern. Avoid cartoon characters, less-than-serious graphics, or theme ties.
- High-fitting dark socks. Avoid light colored socks with a dark suit.
- Business-style leather shoes.
- Matching shoe and belt color. Do not mix black and brown.
- Briefcase or portfolio, no backpack.

## Women

- White, off-white, or neutral-colored blouse with a conservative neckline.
- Suit with a skirt preferable to a pantsuit.
- No ill-fitting (short, tight, clingy, or slit) skirts.

- Closed-toe leather pumps with low to medium heels. Avoid open-toe high heels with straps, sandals, or shoes with decorations.
- Skin-colored hosiery.
- Briefcase or portfolio in place of a handbag or purse.
- Conservative nail polish, avoid unusual colors, e.g., blue or green.
- Understated makeup.
- Small stud earrings instead of dangling or oversized earrings.
- Long hair pulled back in a neat, simple style. No “big hair” or elaborate styles.

Additional information on how to dress appropriately for a face-to-face interview can be found at [CollegeGrad.com](http://www.collegegrad.com) (<http://www.collegegrad.com/jobsearch/15-5.shtml>).

# Security Clearance FAQs for Students

The majority of Federal IA positions you will seek require some level of security clearance. In order to obtain a security clearance, you will be required to submit personal information to the agency interested in hiring you. The information below will provide you with a general overview of the security clearance process and the types of information you will need to begin compiling as early as possible.

## **Who needs a security clearance?**

Any person who has worked or will work for an organization that requires access to restricted information more than likely has or will need a security clearance.

## **What is a security clearance?**

Certain Federal employees and certain employees in the private sector are required to have security clearances because their job requires them to have access to classified documents. Various other work takes place in secured facilities. The occupant of any such job is said to hold a "sensitive" position, defined as "any position, by virtue of its nature, could bring about a material adverse effect on national security."

## **Who issues security clearances?**

Security clearances can be issued by many United States government agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, the Department of Justice, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Most security clearances are issued by the Department of Defense.

## **What are the types of security clearances?**

The scope of investigative work needed to grant a security clearance depends on the level of clearance being requested. There are three basic levels of security classification:

**CONFIDENTIAL:** This refers to material, which, if improperly disclosed, could be reasonably expected to cause some measurable damage to the national security. The vast majority of military personnel are given this very basic level of clearance. This level needs to be reinvestigated every fifteen years.\*

**SECRET:** The unauthorized disclosure of secret information could be expected to cause serious damage to the national security. This level is reinvestigated every ten years.\*

**TOP SECRET:** Individuals with this clearance have access to information or material that could be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security if it was released without authorization. This level needs to be investigated every five years.\*

\* Reinvestigations are more important than the original investigation because those individuals who have held clearances longer are more likely to be working with increasingly critical information.

## **How long does the process take?**

It depends on several factors, and the type of investigation. In the past three years, the government has had a significant backlog of security clearances and reinvestigations pending, most especially for TOP SECRET level access. In general, expect a CONFIDENTIAL or SECRET clearance to take between 3 and 12 months. A TOP SECRET will probably take between 9 and 18 months. In general, the more there is to investigate, the longer the investigation will take. Expect the investigation to take longer if you have:

- Lived or worked in several geographic locations or overseas.
- Traveled outside of the United States.
- Relatives who have lived outside of the United States.
- Background information that is difficult to obtain or involves issues that require an expansion of your case.

It is important to note that the processing time for each individual case will vary depending upon its complexity and the agency it is being conducted for. Additionally, there are initiatives underway by OPM to shorten the duration of obtaining security clearances so these time estimates should be viewed as guidelines.

### **How do you get a security clearance?**

There are three main phases to receiving a security clearance:

1. The first phase is the application process. This involves verification of U.S. citizenship, fingerprinting, and completion of the Personnel Security Questionnaire (SF-86) ([http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf\\_fill/sf86.pdf](http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf86.pdf)). This form can be completed either on paper or online. The method utilized will depend upon the agency to which you are applying. To facilitate online completion of this form, OPM has created an automated version of the SF-86 (called e-QIP) which approximately 30 different agencies utilize to process their security applications. Those agencies and organizations that do not utilize e-QIP process their applications manually. The hiring manager will inform you of the process utilized by that agency.
2. The second phase involves the actual investigation of your background.
3. The final phase is adjudication. The information that has been gathered is evaluated based on factors such as allegiance to the United States, criminal and personal conduct, and substance abuse or mental disorders. Clearance is granted or denied following this evaluation process.

### **What is e-QIP (Electronic Questionnaire for Investigations Processing)?**

e-QIP is an automated request for personnel security investigations currently used by approximately 30 agencies. This e-government initiative is sponsored by OPM and allows applicants to electronically enter, update, and transmit their personal investigative data over a secure Internet connection to their employing agency for review and approval.

## **How do I access e-QIP?**

If the government agency to which you are applying utilizes the e-QIP system, they will need to grant you access to the e-QIP site. Once granted, you will be able to complete the form and electronically submit it for processing. Instructions on how to use the e-QIP system can be found at [www.opm.gov/e-QIP](http://www.opm.gov/e-QIP).

**NOTE: You MUST be given access to the e-QIP applicant website by the hiring agency. Individuals may not apply for a Personal Background Investigation or a Security Clearance in advance. There is no procedure for an individual to independently apply for an investigation or security clearance. Clearances are based on investigations requested by Federal agencies, appropriate to specific positions and their duties. Until you are offered such a position, the government will not request investigation for a clearance. Once you have been offered a job (contingent upon satisfactory completion of an investigation), the government will require you to complete the questionnaire on the e-QIP website, initiate the investigation, adjudicate the results, and issue the appropriate clearance.**

## **Tips for completing the e-QIP questionnaire:**

- Read through the instructions and questions to find out what is required;
- Collect the necessary information;
- Allow plenty of time to complete the form; and
- Answer all of the questions.

Failure to complete the e-QIP form correctly may delay the opening or completion of the investigation and adjudication of the case.

## **What type of information is requested on a security clearance application?**

The amount and detail of information varies with the level of clearance requested. It may include family information, past and current work history, locations you have lived, roommate names, financial history, travel history, groups or affiliations, and more.



### **Types of information requested include:**

- Citizenship;
- Residence address;
- Business ownership interests;
- Names of previous and current employers;
- Names of previous and current roommates;
- Other income sources;
- Military service history;
- Criminal background history within the region the subject currently resides or in counties, states or countries of previous residence or travel;
- Travel history;
- Credit history; and
- Personal financial profile including ownership interests such as real property or motor vehicles and liabilities including bankruptcies, civil judgments, notices of default or foreclosure, and state or Federal tax liens.

To obtain a complete idea of the questions asked on the clearance application, see the sample Standard Form 86 at the back of this document, or visit [http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf\\_fill/SF86C.pdf](http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/SF86C.pdf).

### **What happens after I submit my application?**

Following the submission of your completed application, a security clearance investigation is conducted. This investigation is designed to allow the government to assess whether you are sufficiently trustworthy to be granted access to classified information or for an appointment to a sensitive position or position of trust. You must meet certain criteria, relating to your honesty, character, integrity, reliability, judgment, mental health, and association with undesirable persons or foreign nationals.

Investigators will conduct field interviews with references and persons who know you, including coworkers, employers, personal friends, educators, neighbors, any spouse divorced within the past ten years, and other appropriate individuals. The investigator will attempt to obtain both favorable and unfavorable information about your background so an adjudicator can make an appropriate determination.

Lastly, you will have to sit with an investigator for a face-to-face interview. The objective of the subject interview is to obtain a complete picture of you as an individual so that an adjudicator can determine whether you will be able to cope with having access to classified or sensitive information without becoming a security risk. Therefore, the interview will be wide-ranging and cover most aspects of your life. During the subject interview, you can expect to be questioned about your family background, past experiences, health, use of alcohol or drugs, financial affairs, foreign travel, and other pertinent matters. You are encouraged to be as candid as possible because if you conceal information on your security form or during your subject interview, an adjudicator may determine that you are unreliable and dishonest. In fact your clearance could be denied for withholding information or purposely lying, even though what you were seeking to conceal would not have resulted in an unfavorable clearance determination.

Finally, the investigation results are sent to an adjudication facility, where a Federal employee evaluates the results using established guidelines to determine eligibility for access to classified material. The clearance is then granted or denied.

### **What types of things can prevent someone from receiving a security clearance?**

For collateral (Top Secret, Secret, and Confidential) clearances, all requested information must be disclosed honestly. Falsification and felonies are two items which may cause the government to deny a clearance. Issues such as financial trouble, including insufficient funds, bankruptcy and bad check writing, illegal drug or heavy alcohol use, excessive foreign contact or unexplained affluence must all be explained and investigated thoroughly before a decision can be made and a security clearance granted or denied.

### **Do all government agencies use e-QIP for processing security clearances?**

No. Currently approximately 30 agencies use the e-QIP system. If the hiring agency does not use that system, they will provide instructions on how they collect the clearance information.

### **Can I obtain a security clearance on my own?**

No. You must be sponsored by a cleared government contractor or government entity.

### **Can non-U.S. citizens obtain security clearances?**

Very rarely. In extremely special circumstances and only with the permission of the government entity owning the classified information a non-U.S. citizen could obtain a clearance. This person would be a world class scientist, dignitary, or other high level friend of the U.S. government.

### **Can I appeal a clearance denial or revocation?**

If you are denied a security clearance, or an assignment to a sensitive position or a position of trust, or your current clearance or access is revoked, you have the right to appeal the adjudicative decision. Under such circumstances you will be provided a statement on the reason(s) why you are ineligible for the clearance and the procedures for filing an appeal. If you believe the information gathered about you during the investigation is misleading or inaccurate, you will be given the opportunity to correct or clarify the situation.

## Reminders for Students

As a student registered in the SFS program you will be required to:

- Meet with your Principal Investigator (PI) several times throughout the year and discuss your interests and objectives so that they may be able to assist you achieve them;
- Stay aware of general internship application deadlines (late Fall–prior to January). This allows a minimum of six months for an agency to review a student’s materials prior to summer placement;
- Stay aware of job application deadlines, visit job sites regularly as new positions are posted daily (ongoing);
- Create a job search agent on [USAJOBS.gov](https://USAJOBS.gov) (suggested: 4–6 months prior to your graduation to facilitate full–time placement);
- Create a job search agent on [studentjobs.gov](https://studentjobs.gov) (suggested: 4–6 months prior to the start of your internship);
- Submit an official course transcript (with grades) each semester (or quarter or trimester, as applicable) to your PI and the SFS Program Coordinator at the matched Federal agency;
- Submit quarterly job search activity reports to the SFS Program Office;
- Attend SFS–sponsored Job Fair (January) and other Federal– or university– sponsored events (as scheduled);
- Gather, maintain and assure the accuracy of all security clearance information that may need to be submitted (ongoing);
- Update your resume within 30 days of the end of each academic grading period (ongoing);
- Understand the terms of your service agreement; and
- Participate in any other program-related activities