

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 94
Issue 4 *Winter 2006*

Article 7

January 2006

Of the People: For many alumni, government careers offer the best opportunity to serve

Alexis Grant
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grant, Alexis (2006) "Of the People: For many alumni, government careers offer the best opportunity to serve," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol94/iss4/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.



PROFILES BY ALEXIS GRANT '03
ONLINE FEATURE BY DOUGLAS ROOKS '76
PHOTOS BY FRED FIELD

Of the People

For many alumni, government careers offer the best opportunity to serve

“One of the most important and enduring competitive advantages that a country can have today is a lean, efficient, and honest civil service,” Thomas Friedman asserts in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, his pivotal book explaining how the post-Cold War world works. With newly integrated markets and open borders, he writes, “the quality of your state matters more, not less” than in the past.

From human services to wildlife management to foreign service, and in elected or appointed positions, Colby graduates in civil service fill essential roles that make our society function. Some government jobs are high profile, others obscure, many thankless. But for alumni who see working through the system as the best way to make a difference in the world, careers in government service have long held appeal.

The extent of that appeal ebbs and flows and, for a variety of reasons, America is seeing an outgoing tide.

“There has rarely been a time in our history when it’s been more difficult to attract good people to public service,” said G. Calvin Mackenzie, Colby’s Goldfarb Distinguished Professor of American Government. “Those who do accept the call really are heroic swimmers against a swelling stream of deterrence.”

Public confidence in government has been declining since 1964, according to an ongoing University of Michigan survey. After an upward blip following the 9/11 attacks, the trend angled back downward, Mackenzie said, citing a few real-life reasons that some people avoid the public

sector: “Low salaries, long hours, high stress, twenty-four hour news cycles, highly invasive ethics regulations.”

According to William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Government L. Sandy Maisel, the Reagan-inspired tradition of Republicans running against the federal government is one more reason it’s a wonder that government is able to attract qualified applicants.

Employment data on Colby alumni reflect the trend. The number of career government employees from the 1970s was high. There was a decline in the 1980s, a rebound under Clinton, and another decline of late. But Colbians still gladly and energetically accept the call, in roles ranging from town clerk to assistant secretary of state and as experts at such specialized federal agencies as NASA and the Centers for Disease Control. If these are the “heroic swimmers,” why do they persist?

Colby asked that question of a variety of public servants. Here are portraits of four of them; a gallery of 11 additional Colby grads in public service (see box to left), by Douglas Rooks ’76, is at Colby online.

Service Centered

Eleven Colbians who heeded the call to service. Read more about them online at www.colby.edu/mag

David Linsky '79

Massachusetts state representative

Gail Chase '74

Former Maine state legislator, state auditor

Christine Burke '89, P'06

Former Maine state legislator, current lobbyist

Shawn Jenkins '93

Massachusetts Department of Public Safety, Massachusetts Sex Offender Registry Board

Sarah Dewey '86

Wildlife biologist, Grand Teton National Park

Michael Cantara '75

Maine Commissioner of Public Safety

Cheryl Dineen Soon '70

Former transportation director, Honolulu

Sandy Reed Clougher '69

Family Services district director, Vermont Social Services

Lizzie Ivry Cooper '98

Deputy director of intergovernmental affairs, New York City Dept. of Transportation

Christian Laycock '97

Homicide detective, Marietta, Ga.

Barbara Avery '65

Town clerk, Woodstock, N.H.

A Voice for the Less Fortunate

After graduating from Colby in 1984, Leon Buck, a Ralph Bunche scholar from Philadelphia, was offered a staff position with a Republican senator.

But he didn't take it.

Instead he taught government at a boys' school in Baltimore, earned his law degree at Howard University, then worked as a prosecutor in the Navy. Now, 20 years later, he's made it to Capitol Hill as a staff member for a congresswoman. So why is he doing now what he could have started doing 20 years ago?

Politics, in a word. Unlike the senator who gave him the initial opportunity, U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-Tex.) shares many of his basic beliefs and political goals. "I liked what she believed in. I liked the fact that she was a strong, progressive Democrat," Buck said. "We basically fall on the same political side of the fence."

As Jackson-Lee's chief of staff, Buck works in the congresswoman's Washington, D.C., office, managing staff and preparing legislative strategy. He's helping encourage change in various political arenas, including expanding immigrants' rights and fighting the Patriot Act, he said. "The woman I work for, she fights for things like children, more money for education," said Buck, dressed in a black suit and wearing black-rimmed glasses. "We believe in helping the needy and unfortunate who don't have a voice here in Washington."

His interest in government started in high school, when his mother



Leon Buck '84

worked as a history teacher. At Colby the history and government major served as the student government's cultural life chair. "Being in student government, I think, helped me to become politically aware of how things work," said Buck, a charter member of Colby's Alumni of Color Network.

He built upon that in the late 1990s as Jackson-Lee's legislative director and later as a lawyer for the House Judiciary Committee, in which capacity he argued against impeachment of former President Bill Clinton. "It was then I realized that politics is a nasty, dirty business," he said. "One side will do whatever they can to bring down whoever is in power."

The rewards of service in the legislative branch of the federal government notwithstanding, Buck said he hopes to transition to the private sector, as he did briefly in 2002, when he left government work temporarily to work as a lobbyist. Working for a private firm would give him more time to spend with his wife, who also works for a lawmaker, and their three children, two boys and a girl, all under age 10. As a Hill staffer, it's sometimes after midnight before Buck returns to his home in Bowie, Maryland.

"You can effect change either way—private or public," Buck said. "You can successfully take the skills and experience you acquire while you're in government and take them out into the private industry. And that's eventually what I want to do."

Peacekeeping Mission



Barbara Fitzsimmons Hughes '67

The month before it had been Botswana. Before that, Senegal. Next Barbara Fitzsimmons Hughes '67 was preparing for a trip to Nigeria. While there, she would talk with Nigerian government officials about initiating a peacekeepers' training program for soldiers in that West African country.

The negotiation was part of her job as coordinator of the U.S. State Department's ACOTA program, an acronym for African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance, which trains African military officers to be peacekeepers. It is a skill, Hughes said,

that isn't natural for most soldiers. "We're kind of taking them out of that war fighter [mentality], trying to change the mindset so they can be peacekeepers," she said in her Washington, D.C., office, against the backdrop of a colorful Kente cloth from Ghana.

Once Hughes's six-person team sets up the program in a participating country, members hire American military personnel and contractors to conduct six weeks of training. The soldiers learn negotiation tactics, practice dealing with refugees, and discuss human rights issues. So far, soldiers in 15 African countries have been trained by ACOTA.

"The most rewarding thing is, when we go out, we truly get huge 'thank you's' from the soldiers that we're training," Hughes said. "Generals will pull us aside and say, 'This training is the best thing that we've had in years and we really appreciate America doing this for us.'"

"The reason it's been as successful as it has, and I think it's been extremely successful, is that it requires a real honest-to-gosh buy-in by the foreign military. They have to bring resources to the table. This isn't just us handing them something."

A government major at Colby, Hughes

earned her master's degree in international relations, then joined the Foreign Service so she could travel with her then-husband, who was also in the State Department program. The two served in Mexico, Moscow, Paris, Belgium, and Zimbabwe—often with their two children, one of whom (Guy Hughes '99) went on to graduate from Colby. "It makes families tighter," she said of her family's travels. "They're much more dependent on each other, because friends move on."

Hughes joined ACOTA more than three years ago because it "blissfully" incorporated many of her skills and experience, she said, including her familiarity with Africa and her ability to speak French. She left the organization in July and this fall was looking forward to a new challenge.

"Once you get started with the kind of work we do in the Foreign Service, it's hard to ever go away from it, because it's active. It's a lot of variety, a lot of change. It's never dull," she said. "If it is dull, you can always say, 'This is dull, I'm going to do something else within the system.'"

Where else would she like to travel? "Oh, visiting? That's different," Hughes said. "I'd like to see Asia."

The Nation's Librarian

When Cheryl Adams '79 first moved to Washington, she would sit in the Library of Congress thumbing through the phone book just to be in the beautiful main reading room.

Now she works there as a reference librarian, but her awe of the magnificence of the room hasn't subsided. The 160-foot-high dome was built in 1897, she said, gesturing toward the eight stained-glass windows high above the room.

Working in such a picturesque place is just one of the perks of being a librarian, Adams said. Every day she combs through books assisting people with their research—and adds to her own knowledge. “There’s nothing you can’t be curious about,” said Adams, who lives in Falls Church, Va. “It’s like having this incredible wealth around you at all times.”

When there’s a question she can’t answer, there’s a gold mine of resources, she said. “I don’t know if I’m an expert on anything, but I can certainly find out [anything].”

Soft-spoken, Adams might be pegged for a librarian even outside her workplace. The profession has appealed to her since she was

a child. “I used to make my sister take out my books and I’d fine her when she’d bring them back [late],” she said, adding that she was an avid reader as a child.

Adams’s reference specialty is religion—something she didn’t expect, despite her religion major at Colby. Take a look around her office space and her passion for the subject is obvious: a makeshift shrine of miniature religious figures sits in one corner and a Tibetan prayer flag is draped from the ceiling.

Despite—or perhaps because of—her work in religion, Adams doesn’t practice a particular faith. She grew up Lutheran and now has a strong interest in Buddhism, but doesn’t consider herself Buddhist, she said.

Growing up in Buffalo, N.Y. and Portland, Maine, she earned a master’s in library science in the mid-80s. “Nobody was a religion major back then,” said Adams, who spent her junior year studying religion in England and biked across the United States after graduation.

Now in her 18th year working at the Library of Congress, Adams is a member of the American Theological Library Association



Cheryl Adams '79

and, like many of her colleagues, teaches a research-methods class and a special course for seminary faculty and students. “People come looking for everything from their favorite book as a kid to something very complicated,” she said. The most popular inquiries in her division, humanities and social sciences, are about military history, family history, and politics and government. With her help, the public gains access to resources that help them answer their questions, Adams said.

“I feel very lucky,” she said, “to really love what I do.”

Explaining the Policy

Past the metal detectors and security guards, Sean McCormack '86's office was surprisingly quiet—a marked contrast to the flurry of reporters' questions he faces as spokesman for the U.S. Department of State.

The position, assistant secretary of state for public affairs, “speaks to my practical side,” said McCormack, dressed in a black suit with an American flag pin on his collar. “You have a policy—how do you explain it to people?”

McCormack is used to being in the public spotlight; he spent the last four years as spokesman for the National Security Council. His recent transition to the State Department is parallel to that of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, a personal and professional friend of McCormack's who previously served as national security advisor to President George W. Bush.

“All the different things that happened in those four years—9/11 to Afghanistan to Iraq—it was a fast time to be there,” McCormack said of his tenure at the NSC. “It was very intense. There were a lot of pressures.”

An economics major at Colby, McCormack earned his master's degree in international relations at the University of Maryland and entered the Foreign Service, serving first in Turkey, later in Algeria. He then worked at the State Department until 2001, when he became spokesman at the NSC.

“It wasn't really a natural pathway for someone from Scarborough, Maine,” said McCormack, who lives in Washington, D.C.,



Sean McCormack '86

with his wife, Martha, and their 1-year-old daughter, Grace.

McCormack's interest in government and international relations began at Colby and when he spent his junior year studying in London. It wasn't a tough decision to go into public service, he said, viewing the career as his opportunity to give back to society.

“The issues that I was interested in were issues that really were centered on government service—foreign policy and national security,” he said. “You can do some of that in the private sector, but for the most part, [the opportunity] was in the government.”

The success of the government is related in part to how its leaders communicate, McCormack said in May at the confirmation hearing for his State Department position. “Public affairs affects the success of America's foreign policy. Done right, we can help advance our policy objectives as defined by the President.”

Part of McCormack's role in helping to achieve the administration's policy goals is related to his access to the top policy makers. In 2003, for example, he had a seat in Marine One, the president's helicopter. As he took off from the White House lawn, McCormack found himself looking at the Washington Monument at eye level.

But what he finds most fulfilling about his work isn't riding with the President in Marine One but rather his role in helping the president to implement the administration's agenda. “You have to believe in what it is that you're doing,” he said. “It would be impossible to do the job if you didn't.”