

PAGE A1

Mr. Professor Goes to Washington

By PAUL BASKEN

For Daniel J. Kaniewski, the magic formula needed to redirect his career path from anonymous academic researcher to presidential policy adviser was only 719 words long.

A single newspaper column that he wrote in April 2005 succinctly criticized the Department of Homeland Security's disaster-preparation plans. A few months later, a White House official called Mr. Kaniewski at his George Washington University office and offered him a choice of five staff jobs.

"The deputy homeland-security adviser said, 'You tell me which position you want,'" Mr. Kaniewski recalls.

With President-elect Barack Obama set to take the oath of office next week, hundreds of Mr. Kaniewski's colleagues throughout higher education may soon be following his path into the federal government.

Mr. Obama promised during the campaign that he would staff federal agencies by choosing only those candidates who had "proven excellence" in their field.

That could mean surprise phone calls from Washington over the next few months for professors and deans with expertise in soil engineering, civil rights, aviation safety, economic forecasting, or hundreds of other disciplines.

Or not.

As much as Mr. Obama may hope to find the most-qualified applicants, the widespread expectation among experts is that most of the 8,000 "political appointee" jobs available for him to fill will be taken by those with personal ties to the new president or his campaign. Real academic expertise can help, these observers say, but it usually won't be the deciding factor.

"I wish it weren't this way," says Wendy S. Pangburn, a headhunter who has worked for 30 years recruiting people for federal jobs. "But the reality is that there are a lot of incredibly qualified people out there, so this litmus test of 'Do you have a connection to the campaign?' is a pretty important one."

Pursuit of Merit

Still, the Obama administration, like others before it, is trying to suggest otherwise. The president-elect, in filling out his cabinet, has already chosen two Republicans and his chief rival during the Democratic primaries.

He has also begun tapping colleges for top talent, especially where the available expertise meets a clear policy priority. Mr. Obama nominated Steven Chu, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist concerned with global warming, as his energy secretary, and Mr. Chu's colleague at the University of California, the macroeconomist Christina D. Romer, a student of the Great Depression, to lead the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

Merit will continue to play at least some role as the Obama transition team finds thousands more people to fill out the administration's leadership. It's a simple matter of necessity, says G. Calvin Mackenzie, a professor of American government at Colby College.

"The problem for most new presidents is they've got all these people working on their campaign who really aren't qualified for the kinds of jobs they've got to fill," says Mr. Mackenzie, author of several books on presidential appointments. "You're filling jobs, many of them are technical and scientific — you know, the assistant secretary of the interior for fish and wildlife — you're not going to find that person in campaign headquarters on election night."

Carl Shapiro, a business professor at the University of California at Berkeley, had no political experience in 1995 when he got a political appointment in the Clinton administration as chief economist for the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department.

Now Mr. Shapiro, one of hundreds of academic experts chosen by Obama strategists to serve this past year on a campaign-policy steering committee, is being asked by colleagues for tips on whether and how they should approach the Obama administration.

He advises his fellow academics to reach out to anyone who might be able to help them, since it doesn't cost much to try, but has also warned them to be realistic about their chances. Competition for political appointments may be especially strong now, given how many professors were involved in the Obama campaign's policy committees, he says.

The 8,000 open political positions include about 3,000 full-time jobs. Those, however, aren't the only opportunities for civic-minded academics. The federal bureaucracy has many times more "career" positions, which the administration is required to fill on a purely competitive basis, without any political considerations.

A new administration needs to fill two million staff positions in all, with another half-million workers expected to leave the government within five years, according to Max I.

Stier, president of Partnership for Public Service, a group that encourages careers in federal government.

Mr. Kaniewski won his job on the White House homeland-security staff in 2005 after his editorial, published in *The Washington Times*, caught the attention of administration officials.

It didn't hurt that he had done some volunteer work for the Bush campaign. More important, however, was his expertise — and his timing. Mr. Kaniewski earned his undergraduate degree, in emergency-medical-services management, from George Washington University in 2000. The next year, while working as a Congressional fellow, he helped draft legislative language that sought more money to prepare the nation for a possible terrorist attack.

Then came the September 11 attacks. Congress quickly approved the money Mr. Kaniewski had requested — and his academic colleagues, "almost without exception," entered government service. He is a co-founder of the Homeland Security Policy Institute, at George Washington University, having seen his intertwined academic and government careers repeatedly further each other.

Colleges will almost always welcome back a professor who spent a few years in government, gaining real-world experiences and contacts, says William E. Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland. "Most places are pretty flexible about giving an extended leave of absence for people who are going to be in high-level positions," he says.

Culture Change

Still, it's not a choice that every professor wants to make. The loss of stature suffered by the Kennedy advisers — "the best and the brightest" from places like Harvard and Yale — because of their handling of the Vietnam War, is just one possible pitfall. More-universal considerations include official prying into investments and other details of private life, the possibility of a lower salary, and the personal and professional challenges associated with trading the relative independence of an academic life for the far more structured setting of government bureaucracy.

For those at the very top rungs of campus leadership, life can become far simpler within the rigid structures of government than in the more free-flowing atmosphere of a university, says Donna E. Shalala, president of the University of Miami, who served as secretary of health and human services after leading the University of Wisconsin.

"The U.S. Senate," she says, "is much easier to work than a faculty senate."

At all other levels of the federal bureaucracy, however, the culture change can be unsettling for former professors and college administrators. "In government," Ms. Shalala says, "you've got to put up with people yelling at you who aren't 18 years old."

A study led by David E. Lewis, a professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University, found that appointees who held doctorates were no more successful in leading government programs than were those who did not.

Either way, relatively few politically appointed positions in the federal government will be taken by academics, says Mr. Lewis. "We tend to overestimate our likelihood of getting these jobs."

Section: Government & Politics

Volume 55, Issue 19, Page A1

January 16, 2009

<http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i19/19a00104.htm>