Launching a Career in Intelligence and National Security

MICHAEL J. MORELL CENTER
FOR INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY STUDIES

Introduction

Welcome to The University of Akron's Center for Intelligence and Security Studies! Careers in intelligence and national security are extremely fulfilling, but breaking into these fields can be very difficult if you don't know what job you want and which paths are most likely to get you to your desired destination. Thankfully, you have access to the knowledge of University of Akron (UA) faculty and the experiences of UA graduates and other advisors to the Morell Center who have successfully acquired jobs in intelligence, national security, and law enforcement - several of whom have provided input to this document! Listen to their guidance and follow in their footsteps if you are serious in your pursuit of a career in intelligence or national security. Leverage the Center's resources and take personal responsibility to achieve your goal of successfully transitioning from an engaged student to a career professional.

Common Acronyms

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

DEA: Drug Enforcement Agency

DHS: Department of Homeland Security

DOD: Department of Defense

DIA: Defense Intelligence Agency

FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation

INTERPOL: International Criminal Police Organization

IGO: Inter-governmental Organization

KSA: Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

NCTC: National Counterterrorism Center

NGA: National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

NGO: Non-governmental Organization

NSA: National Security Agency

ODNI: Office of the Director of National Intelligence

TS/SCI: Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (security clearance)

UN: United Nations

What You Can Do with a Security Studies Degree

Career opportunities in the intelligence, national security, and law enforcement fields include:

- Intelligence analysis or operations (CIA, DIA, FBI, NGA, NSA, etc. for U.S. citizens)
- Foreign Service Officer (U.S. Department of State for U.S. citizens) and diplomacy, including the UN (for all nationals)
- Counterterrorism and counter-radicalization (CIA, FBI, NCTC, etc.)
- Intelligence/defense contractors (private sector)
- Corporate intelligence, risk assessments, and market analysis
- Cybersecurity
- Federal or local law enforcement (DEA, DHS, FBI, state and local police departments, etc.)
- Law enforcement IGOs (e.g. INTERPOL)
- Customs and border control (DHS, Coast Guard)
- Emergency management (DHS, state and local emergency bureaus)
- Data analysis (statistics, survey research, etc.)
- U.S. military (various specialties)
- Think Tanks, Humanitarian NGOs or IGOs
- Linguist (NSA)

How to Get the Job You Want

Be Competitive

Competition is fierce for jobs in the intelligence and national security fields. Whether you are seeking an entry-level position, a fellowship, or just an internship, your application will be one among hundreds if not thousands.

Tip! Actively seek advice on cover letters, resumes, and application packages for the jobs you are passionate about. If possible, solicit advice from multiple people. This way, your applications have undergone several layers of review which enhances delivery and effectiveness.

Be Selective

When submitting applications, do not use the "shotgun" approach. Instead, choose your shots strategically. You greatly increase your chances of securing your desired position if you first decide what specialties interest you most, focus on the positions you are currently or can soon become best qualified for, identify what paths are most likely to result in successfully acquiring the job you want at your preferred agency, and then take steps toward those goals.

Tip! If you are unsure of what you want, talk to people who have positions that interest you or work for organizations you are interested in. In so doing, ask about their career trajectories and the culture of the organization they are in. This way, you enhance the potential of your resume being flagged and you are better prepared to interview.

Stand Out (in a good way)

Public and private sector hiring processes are designed to quickly distinguish between competitive and non-competitive candidates. Even informational interviews and networking conversations are venues where you will be evaluated and judged as a "serious" prospect (or not). To achieve your goals, you must build a reputation and a resume that sets you apart from the many, many other candidates competing for opportunities.

Tip! Be dynamic in your communications with potential employers. Start by articulating a specific interest you have (i.e. briefly recap of a relevant news story and how it motivated your application) or by being personal – tell the reader who you really are, then launch into how your qualifications fit. But don't make it weird. Or be too dramatic. There's a balance.

Demonstrate Value

Employers will hire people they think will bring value-added to their organization. What do you have to offer that will help an agency achieve its mission? You are more likely to be hired if you demonstrate in your application that you understand the organization's mission and have the knowledge, skills, and abilities – also known as KSAs – to advance it. The term "KSA" may not be used in the non-government job market, but the same principles apply in the private sector.

Tip! Prior to an interview practice your motivation statement and clearly articulate how that directly relates to the organization/position you are applying for. Have a strong motivation statement that explains why you want to work for that organization, what you can bring to the table, and how the job/organization is crucial to helping you achieve your goals.

Know Where to Apply

The USAJobs.gov website is a great resource but not always the most expeditious path to securing a permanent job in the intelligence or national security fields. Some agencies post their internship and fellowship opportunities to USAJobs, but many use their own websites, application portals, and selection processes for internships, fellowships, and permanent positions.

- For student programs and permanent positions, undergraduate and graduate students can apply at agency-specific websites maintained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), National Security Agency (NSA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and others.

- The best fellowship that graduate students should pursue is the Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF).

- Both undergraduate and graduate students can apply for the Boren Fellowship.

- Private sector companies in the intelligence and national security fields will consider applicants with either Bachelor's or Master's degrees, though some will prioritize applicants who already have an active security clearance.

Tip! Many opportunities are not prominently advertised and are instead filled through informal networks and references from insiders already working in the intelligence or national security fields. This makes networking with individuals with backgrounds in intelligence, national security, or law enforcement all the more important.

Know When to Apply

Plan ahead and pay close attention to application deadlines. You will typically need to apply many months before the actual start date of a government internship or fellowship because the selection process has multiple stages. Internships, fellowships, or permanent positions where the selected candidate will subsequently be investigated for a security clearance require an even longer lead time – sometimes an entire year or longer!

Tip! Apply early whenever you can. Many organizations review applications in the order they are received.

Submit a Quality Application

In addition to highlighting your KSAs and demonstrating how your interests and experiences align with the hiring agency's mission, your application materials will reveal how well you can write clearly and concisely. A well-written essay can make the difference between being offered an internship and having your application fed to a document shredder.

Invest time learning about the organization, its mission, and the specific opportunities available before drafting your application. Then ask someone with relevant perspective to give you feedback on your application. Take to heart any feedback you receive.

Finally, know that some hiring processes are extremely opaque, and unless you are selected for further consideration, your application may receive no response whatsoever. Don't take this personally and use any setbacks to re-focus your approach and find ways to improve your application materials.

How to Find Your Destination and Path

Start Early

The sooner you can identify the job you want and the government agencies or private sector companies you want to work for, the sooner you can start tailoring your studies and experiences to the KSAs they will use to evaluate applicants. There is no such thing as "too soon" to start crafting your career plan, especially because along the way you will encounter new information and opportunities that may change your desired destination and path. Start early. Start right now. If you are reading this document, you are already on the right track. If you are about to graduate, it may be already too late for you to apply to many fellowships and government internships.

Develop Connections

Right now, start talking to people who work in the fields of intelligence, national security, and law enforcement. Not because they will hand you a job (hiring in the public sector does not work that way), but instead so they can be a resource and a sounding board. They can help you learn if their line of work is really for you, give you advice, and make you aware of lesser-known opportunities that aren't widely publicized. Any time someone with a background in intelligence, national security, or law enforcement visits Akron's campus, meet and talk with them! The same goes for off-campus or on-line opportunities.

Build Your KSAs

Do projects in your courses and work with professors outside of class on the KSAs that are relevant to your career goals. Push yourself to learn new things and apply the analytic skills you are learning in the program. Create written products that showcase your KSAs and add them to your portfolio and resume. Every project during your student experience should be viewed this way.

Get an Internship

Not all internships are created equal. If you are seeking to become an intelligence or national security professional, working on a political campaign will not be helpful to your career prospects. If your goal is to work in the federal government, try to get an internship at an agency where you would ultimately like to work and which will grant you a security clearance. This is often difficult and may involve sacrifice. Competition is tough, and most federal internships are not paid. But if you can get one, an internship will probably be worth it.

Other than a few key fellowships (e.g. the PMF and Boren programs), an internship in a federal agency is your best bet of becoming a permanent federal employee. If a federal internship is not in the cards, go local.

While completing any internship, focus on networking, building your KSAs, and learning what pathways are most likely to result in successfully acquiring a permanent position. Exhibit professionalism, seek out mentors, and contribute to the organization to such a degree that co-workers will become advocates for you and your career goals.

Be Proactive and Resilient

Internships, learning opportunities, and job opportunities will not fall into your lap. You need to hustle to get them. Build the biggest, strongest resume you can. Create a network of contacts, mentors, and advocates. This will take effort, the payoff will not be immediate, and you will face setbacks, but do not give up!

Do's and Do not's for Success

Network, and Do It Well

Networking with intelligence, national security, and law enforcement professionals will help you identify what agencies, jobs, and specialties most interest you and what pathways are most likely to result in successfully transitioning from engaged student to career professional. It will also help you learn what careers **don't** interest or inspire you.

As you network, how you present yourself and your credentials will be major factors in whether these contacts will take you seriously and aid your career pursuits. Later on, as you apply and interview for positions, or are investigated for a security clearance, these factors will continue to impact your prospects for permanent employment.

Build a Good Reputation

How you behave around others will have a significant impact on how you are perceived. Are you considered engaged, professional, mature, and polite? How you present yourself is key to first impressions and also to the longer term assessments that people make about you. You want not only your professors to perceive you as engaged, professional, mature, and polite, but your fellow classmates and co-workers as well. You never know who will be in a position to help you later, and people generally do not stick their neck out to help people who they think will behave in a way that will reflect negatively on them.

Do's

- Do network! Meet people who are in the field you want to be in.
- Do be engaged in class and in all settings where you can learn and where people will assess you and your credentials.
- Do be proactive in your work. Earning a reputation as a go-getter is important.
- Do use professional language in class and other settings.
- Do present a professional appearance, especially when networking and interviewing. First impressions matter!
- Do treat others with respect. Learn and practice emotional intelligence.
- Do learn how to write well, that is: clearly and concisely.
- Do read books by experts in your areas of interest. Also investigate books and resources on professional and personal development, including Harvard Business Review's "Must Reads" series and authors such as Brene Brown, Simon Sinek, Daniel Pink, Keith Ferrazzi, and Marcus Buckingham.

Do not's

- Do not look for the path of least resistance.
- Do not procrastinate. Your academic studies and your career success are your responsibilities. ACT!
- Do not be "too cool to care." Care or find something else to do.
- Do not expect others to give you something that you have not earned.
- Do not give up after encountering setbacks. Be persistent, recalibrate your approach, and try again! This goes for learning something new in class, applying for an internship, and countless other settings.

Security Clearances

Their Importance

Obtaining a security clearance greatly increases your job opportunities in the intelligence and national security fields. There are even specific job websites, such as https://www.clearancejobs.com/ and https://clearedjobs.net/, that cater exclusively to applicants who already have a security clearance. Also, some private sector companies will be especially motivated to hire you if you already have an active clearance because they can assign you to higher valued government contracts, which will unlock additional future opportunities.

It is important to remember that all clearance levels are helpful. In most agencies, clearances range from a public trust, to secret, to top secret, and top secret, secret compartmentalized information (TS/SCI). While many positions require high-level clearances, getting a clearance at a lower level can expedite this process. For example, if you receive a public trust clearance (very low level), it can make obtaining a secret clearance easier.

The Challenge

Obtaining a security clearance can be a “chicken or the egg” situation. Some positions require a clearance to apply, while many agencies will only sponsor you for a security clearance after offering you a position. This dilemma confirms how getting an internship can reap major dividends. If you are selected for an internship in an agency specializing in intelligence, national security, or law enforcement, it may sponsor you for a security clearance.

The Process

Regardless of the agency, security clearance investigators will pay close attention to several factors, listed below. Some intelligence agencies will require a polygraph – either a narrowly-scoped one to confirm you are not a counter-intelligence (CI) risk, or a much more in-depth examination that delves into very personal details (sometimes called a “full scope” or “lifestyle” polygraph).

Factors that may prevent you from **obtaining** a security clearance:

- Allegiance (or suspected allegiance) to states or entities other than the United States
- Undocumented or unsupervised travel to countries considered high CI threat environments (e.g. Cuba, Russia)
- Criminal conduct
- Alcohol abuse, drug use
- Irresponsible personal conduct, including but not limited to risky financial behavior, that may create CI risks
- Emotional or mental instability
- Note: Attending therapy will not preclude you from getting a security clearance.

Factors that may prevent you from **retaining** a security clearance (once granted):

- Same as the list above, plus any security violations or misuse of government information, resources, or systems while employed by a government agency.

Recommendations:

- Be prepared to provide to investigators details about you, your immediate family members, everywhere you have lived, worked, or attended school, and all of your foreign travel and close foreign (non-U.S. citizen) associations.
    - Tip! Create Excel/Google Drive sheets to document all of this information. Then, when you have to fill out the SF-86 (and later talk with your investigator), you can print it and provide your investigator to talk through it all. This can be extremely helpful to investigators and you.
    - For travel, make columns for: country, location, dates, days in country, reason, accommodation (addresses), travel companion(s), funding (i.e. self-funded), references
    - For jobs: organization, dates of employment, address of work, references
    - For residences/schools: name, dates, address, references
- Travel – If you have already visited "hot spots" around the world, identify points of contact that can corroborate where you went and attest to the innocuous nature of the travel. If you are planning future travel to dangerous locales, countries that are considered high CI threat environments, or major U.S. adversaries (e.g. Russia or China), it is best to do so under the auspices of a reputable U.S. organization (school, travel agency, private business, etc.).

- Alcohol and Drug Use – People who use illegal drugs and drink excessively are considered security risks. If you are doing these things now and hope for a career in intelligence, national security, or law enforcement, stop the behavior as soon as you can, even if that means getting professional help. Even one instance of smoking marijuana within the last year can disqualify you from getting a security clearance. Do not think you will be able to successfully lie about it.

- Debt – Individuals deeply in debt might be targets for blackmail or attempts at bribery. If you have accumulated significant debt, have a plan to pay it off.

- Social Media – Security clearance investigators and hiring officials will look at your social media profile. What will they see? Is it something you would like a potential employer to see? Be mindful about what you post. Rants and "jokes" that might feel satisfying in the moment will come back to haunt you. #Regret

- Mental illness will not exclude you from a career in intelligence, national security, or law enforcement. What is most important is if you can function normally and in a controlled manner, and that you have taken steps to address side effects of ill mental health (counseling services, properly medicating, etc.).

Websites You Should Explore (Right Now!)

Many agencies have several different web pages that will be helpful to you: For example, one page will describe general career paths within the organization, and other pages will list currently available jobs or student programs. Peruse these sites, as they offer a wealth of information and could very well have your future internship or job listed on them. Pick one and click the link right now! Pay attention if something on one of these websites catches your eye or inspires you; follow that feeling!

**Please report any non-functioning links to the Center so we can update them!

GovLoop

GovLoop is an on-line social network for people already working in government or seeking to enter the public sector. In addition to their blogs on leadership, innovation, and many other topics, GovLoop has published several helpful guides that you should consult, including:

- Guide to Internships and Fellowships in Government (2014) http://www.govloop.com/resources/new-improved-guide-internships-fellowships-government/

- Guide to Applying for a PMF Fellowship (2019) https://www.govloop.com/resources/guide-managing-2019-pmf-application-process/

- Guide to Getting into Government (2016) https://www.govloop.com/resources/getting-into-government-a-guide-for-high-achievers/

Key Fellowships

- Presidential Management Fellowship
  https://www.pmf.gov/

- Boren
  https://dlnseo.org/
  https://dlnseo.org/content/higher-education
  http://www.borenawards.org/

- NNSA Graduate Fellowship Program
  https://www.pnnl.gov/projects/ngfp

Intelligence Community Internships

- Intelligence Community (general)
  www.intelligence.gov
  https://www.intelligencecareers.gov/iccareers.html?Agency=ODNI
  https://www.dni.gov/index.php/careers/student-opportunities

- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
  https://www.cia.gov/careers/student-opportunities
  https://www.cia.gov/careers/

- Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)
  www.dia.mil/careers/students

- National Security Agency (NSA)
  www.nsa.gov/careers/opportunities_4_u/students/index.shtml
  https://www.nsa.gov/careers/

- National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA)
  https://www1.nga.careers.mil/Careers/StudentOpp/Internships/Pages/default.aspx

State Department / United Nations

- Virtual internships
  https://vsfs.state.gov/

- Foreign Service Exam
  https://careers.state.gov/work/foreign-service/officer/test-process/

- Careers and student programs
  https://2009-2017.state.gov/careers/index.htm
  https://careers.state.gov/intern

- United Nations:
  www.un.org/depts/OHRM/sds/internships/index.htm

National Security

- Defense Department
  https://kb.defense.gov/app/answers/detail/a_id/230/~/internships

- Department of Homeland Security
  www.dhs.gov/student-opportunities

Law Enforcement

- Federal Bureau of Investigation
  http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/nsb
  https://www.fbijobs.gov/2.asp

- Drug Enforcement Agency
  www.dea.gov/careers/student-entry-level.shtml

Think Tanks

- Brookings Institution
  www.brookings.edu/about/employment

- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:
  http://carnegieendowment.org/about/index.cfm?fa=employment

- Center for Strategic and international Studies
  http://csis.org/about-us/internships

- Institute for National Security Studies
  www.inss.mil

- National Defense University
  www.ndu.edu/About/Internships.aspx

- RAND Corporation
  http://www.rand.org/search.html?query=internships

- U.S. Institute for Peace
  www.usip.org/jobs

- Wilson Center
  www.wilsoncenter.org/opportunities/Internship

USAJobs.gov

Federal agencies use USAJobs.gov to hire qualified applicants for entry-level positions. However, they also use this platform to promote internal candidates into roles of higher responsibility or to facilitate the transfer of specific individuals from one agency to another. As such, not every vacancy posted to USAJobs represents a "real" entry-level vacancy worth your time.

Create an account on USAJobs.gov, consult their guide on best practices for resume writing, search for jobs, and read sample job postings to learn how federal agencies define KSAs, explain their hiring processes, etc. When using USAJob's search function, use these filters to distinguish between "real" opportunities you should apply for vs. others:

- "Open to all U.S. citizens"
- Pay grade:
  - GS-5 to GS-7 for Bachelor's Degree holders
  - GS-9 for Master's Degree holders
  - GS-11 to GS-12 for PhD holders

Any postings that are "Internal to an agency" are NOT entry-level positions, and you should NOT apply for them.

Visit:

https://www.usajobs.gov/

https://www.usajobs.gov/Help/working-in-government/

https://www.govloop.com/resources/10-tips-finding-job-usajobs/

Private Sector Opportunities

Working at a government agency is not the only way to join the intelligence, national security, or law enforcement sectors – far from it! There is a HUGE world of private sector opportunities out there, and the companies listed below do a tremendous amount of work for federal and state governments.

Peruse the list below as another way to find specialties that may interest you. You might find your next job here, but note that you will be subject to the same fierce competition as if you were applying to a government agency. Also, some private sector companies will want applicants to already have a security clearance – hence the importance of first securing an internship that will grant you one.

Finally, the list below focuses on large firms, but there are countless medium- and smaller-sized companies in the intelligence and national security fields, and networking is the best way to learn about opportunities at these organizations.

BAE
A leading supplier of cyber, intelligence, and security capabilities to government agencies, and a growing supplier of cyber and network security capabilities to commercial customers.
https://www.baesystems.com/en/what-we-do/cyber-security---intelligence

Booz Allen Hamilton
Focuses largely on consulting, advises on homeland security, infrastructure, health, and other issues. Deals with defense agencies and the armed forces.
http://www.boozallen.com/

CACI International, Inc.
Specializes in cyber security, intelligence analysis, surveillance and reconnaissance, and consulting in other areas of security.
http://www.caci.com/

DynCorp
Specializes in intelligence gathering and analysis, education and training.
http://www.dyn-intl.com/

General Dynamics
General Dynamics is a global aerospace and defense company.
https://www.gd.com/

Leidos
Key lines of business — civil, defense, health, and intelligence.
https://www.leidos.com/company/our-business

Lockheed Martin
Lockheed Martin is a global security and aerospace company and is principally engaged in the research, design, development, manufacture, integration and sustainment of advanced technology systems, products and services.
https://lockheedmartin.com/en-us/index.html/

MITRE
MITRE works across federal, state and local governments, as well as industry and academia in areas such as artificial intelligence, data science, information science, space security, and cyber resilience.
https://www.mitre.org/

Raytheon
A corporation focused on aviation, defense, and space industries.
https://www.rtx.com/

SAIC
Focuses on providing technology solutions across the defense, space, civilian, and intelligence markets.
https://www.saic.com/