

# **The Consortium Research Fellows Program as a Career-Launching Opportunity**

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What if students in psychological science could access a specialized, high-level federal research facility where they would be employed and could conduct thesis/dissertation research and other research projects, as well as have opportunities to start their careers in the same or a related setting? What if they could do this all while accruing invaluable experience by working with some of the world's top scientists? What if postdocs and faculty had similar opportunities? That is exactly what is available through the Consortium Research Fellows Program (CRFP) operated by the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area.

The CRFP began in 1981 under the leadership of Robert Ruskin as a partnership between the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) and the Consortium of Universities. From the beginning, the goal of this partnership was to provide some of the nation's best and brightest graduate students in the behavioral and social sciences with an opportunity to work in a federal research setting.

In the more than 35 years since its inception, the CRFP has expanded in both its size and its mission. In addition to its initial contract with ARI, the CRFP has held contracts with the Air Force's 711th Human Performance Wing/Human Effectiveness Directorate, the Defense Manpower Data Center, the National Defense University, and the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division. Its current leader, Scott A. Beal, was a CRFP Fellow himself, and so is uniquely qualified to understand the program from both the Fellow's and the Director's position. Beal's current goals for the CRFP are to provide educationally relevant, well-paid professional experiences for undergraduate and graduate students; arrange research opportunities for postdocs and faculty; offer high-quality technical and analytical support to sponsoring agencies; and foster a new generation of scientists. These scientists, either directly as government employees or indirectly as contractors, will support Department of Defense (DoD) Research & Development in the future. In short, the CRFP is a critical talent pipeline for the DoD.

The CRFP's core affiliation under the Consortium is a key to the CRFP's longtime success. Consisting of 17 colleges and universities in the metropolitan Washington, DC, area and under the leadership of its President and CEO John C. Cavanaugh, an APS Fellow, the Consortium is one of the largest collaborations among public and private higher-education institutions in the country. It is also one of the few to sponsor a high-level research program on behalf of its members.

The CRFP currently employs 50 graduate and undergraduate students and postdocs and 30 faculty from colleges and universities in a wide array of disciplines, including psychology, computer science, information systems and technology, engineering, physics, chemistry, biomedicine, sociology, anthropology, and mathematics. CRFP Fellows serve with DoD agencies located in the Washington, DC, region and in six states across the country. Fellows have been recruited from 85 colleges and universities.

Consortium Research Fellows (graduate and undergraduate students) are paid and are assigned to research or technical teams at the sponsoring agencies and work up to 20 hours per week during the academic year and full-time in the summer. More importantly, they develop professionally under the mentorship of national and international experts in their fields, coauthor publications and presentations, and often accomplish their master's theses or doctoral dissertations using fellowship research. The government gains more than 35 person-years of effort from Fellows each calendar year and benefits from the fresh perspectives they bring as a result of studying the latest research and practice in their disciplines.

Postdoctoral Fellows have earned their doctorates within the last 3 years and work full time in one of the sponsoring agencies for 1 to 3 years. Both the Postdoctoral Fellows and the sponsoring agencies they work for benefit from this relationship.

Faculty members are appointed for short-term, specific research tasks to augment government research teams by providing skills and expertise that are not available in-house. These Senior Fellows are valuable assets to the Program and are an example of the strong relationship the CRFP is able to foster between government and academia.

Since its inception, more than 1,200 students have participated in the Program. They have been 48% male, 52% female, and 24% ethnic minority. A study of psychology graduate students in the United States showed that those who participated in the CRFP were more likely to complete their degrees than those who did not. Many alumni of the CRFP have entered into government service after completing the Fellows Program and are now mentors of the next generation of research fellows. Numerous others have joined private firms that are government contractors, and thus continue to use the expertise gained in their fellowships in support of DoD.

In addition to mentoring a new generation of research scientists, the CRFP links individual students to their personal research and occupational goals. The following narrative describes Beal's personal experience, from graduate student, to CRFP Fellow, to federal researcher, and to Program Director. Many former CRFP Fellows have followed similar pathways. Here is his story.

*Typical of many graduate students who advance to candidacy, I was anxious about an impending career search. My ambitions included a position with a prestigious consulting firm, a large salary, and plenty of time off. I maintained that naïve vision until a thoughtful professor offered unsolicited, but much needed, advice.*

*He invited me to his home on a Saturday. When I arrived, he turned off his lawnmower, took me to his dining room, and spent 45 minutes describing the arduous work life associated with the type of consulting in which I had expressed interest. His advice was forthright and illuminating. After careful consideration, I concluded that consulting would not be a part of my future.*

*Shortly thereafter, I was approached by a fellow graduate student who suggested I attend a discussion with the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI). I expressed my disinterest in all things military, but she persisted, stating that I would find it interesting and that I was a "good fit." She was correct on both counts.*

*I attended the discussion. My empirical curiosity was provoked. I was especially intrigued by the idea of conducting applied research with soldiers caught in the interacting worlds of the US Army, the federal government, and psychology. I applied for and was offered a CRFP graduate student research fellowship.*

*The fellowship was located at the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. I was assigned to work with a senior ARI researcher on a broad range of topics including leadership, assessment and selection, training simulations, officer development courses, and basic rifle marksmanship. The senior researcher served formally as my mentor. Although I had few useful ideas and experiences to contribute, she adopted me as a member of her research team and reinforced my meager efforts.*

*After working for 2 years as a student fellow, I accepted a postdoctoral research fellowship following a successful dissertation defense. I served as a Postdoctoral Fellow for a year, and then accepted a full-time federal government position with ARI, where I worked for 15 years. During that time, I had the privilege of mentoring CRFP students and Postdoctoral Fellows at the US Army Infantry School and the US Army Special Operations Command.*

*In 2013, Robert Ruskin, CRFP Founder and Director, passed away. I left federal government service the following year to join the Consortium of Universities and direct the CRFP. Since then, it has been my great privilege to continue linking students, postdocs, and professors with federal agencies in support of academic achievement and research excellence.*

*Ruskin's collaborative model was developed and implemented more than 35 years ago. For more than half that time, I have observed the mutual benefits that students, postdocs, professors, and federal researchers enjoy. The CRFP continues to make those possible.*