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THE JUNGLE | Focus on Recruitment, Pay and Getting Ahead

Opening New Doors With a Fellowship

BY TODDI GUTNER

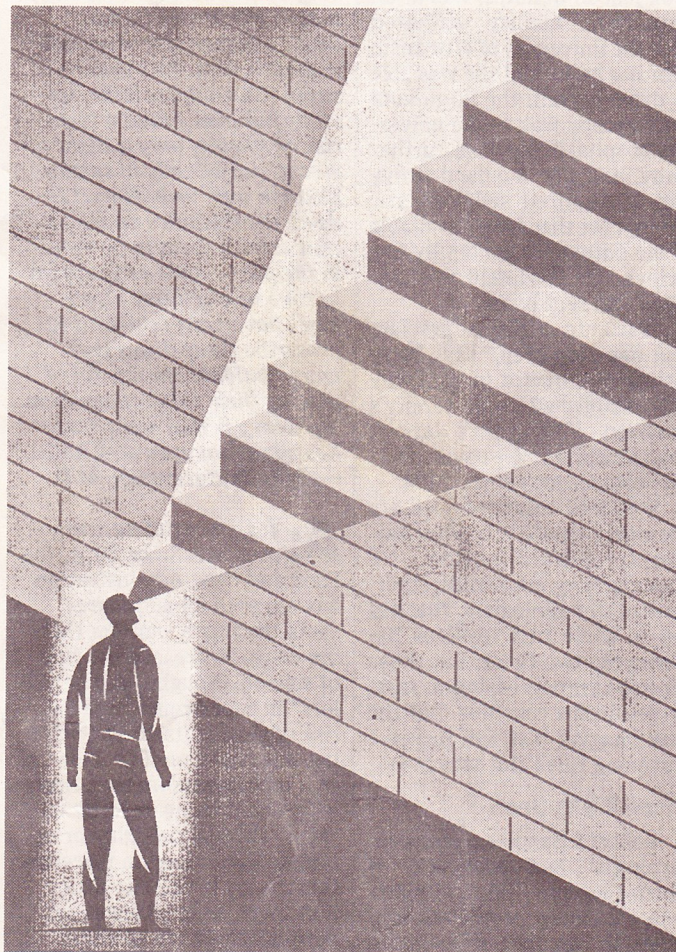
Kenneth Zeff is convinced that it wasn't his stellar academic record—he graduated with an M.B.A. from University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business—or his years of work experience at Deloitte Consulting that catapulted him to the role of chief operating officer at the age of 36.

Instead, he says it was his participation in two prestigious fellowships in Washington, D.C., and San Diego that caught the eye of his employer, the Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools, an organization that serves disadvantaged students in south Los Angeles. Mr. Zeff spent two years as an assistant to the superintendent of San Diego Public Schools as a Broad Foundation resident. And he spent a year as a White House fellow in 2006.

"The fellowships totally altered my career trajectory," says Mr. Zeff, adding that he wanted to marry his weekend volunteer work with school-age children in underserved areas with his business background. It was something the two fellowships made possible. "They opened doors and introduced me to incredible opportunities," he says.

Both of Mr. Zeff's fellowships, like many midcareer programs, were well-regarded and hard to get. The prestigious White House Fellowship may be the most competitive. More than 1,000 people apply annually, but fewer than 20 are accepted each year. The fellowship provides experience at the highest level of the federal government. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, presidential historian and author Doris Kearns Goodwin and retired general Wesley Clarke are among the graduates of the program.

Fellowships, in general, are multifaceted programs that run anywhere from three months to about two years. Targeted toward high-achieving professionals with a variety of experience levels, they can require a temporary leave of



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absence from a job, in exchange for a stipend. Some fellowships are field-specific. Others aim to promote leadership, policy awareness or skills in management.

While the programs aren't right for everyone, they can be a good fit for professionals who have a good idea of where they want to go in their careers, says Janet Eissenstadt, director of the President's Commission on White House Fellowships.

To figure out whether pursuing a fellowship is right for you, it's best to find people whom you respect and ask their advice. "Start with your goals and what you hope to accomplish," says Ms. Eissenstadt. Once you've decided the fellowship path is

worth pursuing, it isn't as simple as logging on to a Web site and applying. For starters, no national clearinghouse for fellowships exists. To find the right one for you, you'll need to tap your professional network, academic institutions and mentors to get information on fellowships that might suit you.

"Look for announcements of recruitment sessions in alumni magazines and professional journals, and ask around," recommends Diane Yu, a former White House fellow who is now chief of staff and deputy to the president of New York University. Ms. Yu also serves as president of the White House Fellows foundation and alumni association.

Since most programs require you to take a leave from work, make sure you're up for the commitment. If you are a top performer at work, it will be easier to convince your employer to give you the time off. But keep in mind that your company may decide not to hold your job.

Past participants, like Ms. Yu, say you may not want to go back to your job. She took a leave from her position as the superior court commissioner of Alameda County in California to serve as a White House fellow in 1986. During her time there, she worked on the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement, the precursor to the North America Free Trade Agreement. The experience prompted her to reconsider her former job. "I intended to go back but I had so many offers that I knew I had to move on," says Ms. Yu.

There are financial considerations to taking a fellowship. Jenifer McKim, 41, who left her job as an investigative reporter at the Orange County Register after 10 years to attend the Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard last year, came out just about even in salary. Her annual stipend from the fellowship came to \$72,000. The White House Fellowship pays about \$100,000 as a stipend for the year. The Broad Foundation Fellowship offers a stipend of \$85,000 to \$95,000. Programs that require you to leave your job typically provide health-insurance benefits.

Participants say the doors fellowships open are unparalleled. Mr. Zeff says his fellowship gave him access to people critical to his new career. "Being a White House fellow was like having a backstage pass to everyone in federal government," says Mr. Zeff. He was able to immediately schedule meetings with the heads of the two top education unions during the fellowship. Those contacts helped him land a job as a senior consultant for the U.S. Secretary of Education before moving to his current position in 2007.