Kupor to ASU students: Federal government needs fresh talent and a new way of working

Office of Personnel Management director urges students to consider public service, arguing that meaningful reform starts with changing the system

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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Story highlights

Director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Scott Kupor spoke to nearly 25 Next Generation Service Corps students during an Oct. 22 visit that also included a fireside chat with ASU leadership.

Kupor encouraged students to consider a career in government service, where just 7% of the workforce is age 30 or younger, as a means to introduce fresh ideas and innovation before transitioning into the private sector.

Kupor espoused the idea of a government workforce where innovation, thoughtful risk-taking and strong performance should be encouraged rather than stifled.

Just 7% of the federal workforce is age 30 or younger, while nearly half of its employees are 50 or older. For Scott Kupor, director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), those numbers tell a troubling story about an institution struggling to attract the next generation of talent.

“This is a systems problem, not a people problem,” Kupor told Arizona State University students during an Oct. 22 visit to the Tempe campus.

The federal government, he argued, has capable people who want to serve the public, but too often its rules, incentives and workplace culture stand in their way.

“We need to change the system to reward the behavior we want,” he said, describing a government workforce where innovation, thoughtful risk-taking and strong performance should be encouraged rather than stifled.

Kupor brought that message first to Brett Hunt’s PAF 315 Cross-Sector Collaboration class, where students from a range of academic disciplines are preparing to tackle complex challenges that cross the boundaries of government, business, the military and other sectors. About an hour later, Kupor continued the conversation during a fireside chat with Chris Howard, ASU executive vice president and chief operating officer, before approximately 125 students.

The visit offered students a direct look at the opportunities and challenges of federal service from a leader who spent nearly three decades in the technology and investment industries before entering government.

ASU President Michael M. Crow underscored why this type of conversation is needed. The federal government, he told students before the fireside chat, operates institutions and services that touch nearly every part of daily life, from food safety and clean water to transportation standards, public health and scientific research.

“Scott is focused on how do we find the best talent? How do we find young talent? How do we find the best minds?” Crow said, emphasizing that public service is about ensuring the government can deliver essential services and meet the country's long-term needs.

Kupor’s visit builds upon ASU’s ongoing efforts to create programs preparing students for public service careers. ASU serves as the inaugural chair of the Next Generation Federal Workforce Consortium, a coalition of top universities working with federal agencies to help prepare and recruit talented students for public service roles.

Crow encouraged students to think beyond politics and consider how their individual skills could contribute to the public good. Engineers, scientists, business graduates and professionals from countless other fields all have a role to play in making government work.

For Hunt, whose class examines how people and institutions can work together to solve large-scale problems, Kupor's visit brought that mission into sharp focus.

“What was really eye-opening for our students was this idea of opportunity in the federal government for early-career development where they can apply their skills as cross-sector leaders from various disciplines in important roles in public service without the pressure that they need to stay there 40 years,” said Hunt, executive director of the Next Generation Service Corps and professor of practice in the School of Public Affairs.

Kupor knows the private sector well. Before becoming OPM director in July 2025, he spent 17 years in venture capital, including work with the Silicon Valley investment firm Andreessen Horowitz. That experience shaped his view that an organization's success depends less on its

products or technology than on how effectively its people work toward shared objectives.

He sees an opportunity to apply those lessons to the federal government, which employs roughly 2 million civilian workers across agencies ranging from NASA and the Department of Energy to the Social Security Administration.

The challenge, he said, is cultural. Employees have too often been encouraged to avoid mistakes rather than pursue meaningful results. In such an environment, people may hesitate to try new approaches because they fear the consequences of failure, even when innovation could improve government services.

Kupor wants to change that equation by establishing clearer objectives, recognizing high performers, holding employees accountable and creating room for responsible experimentation.

“We want people to think creatively. We want people to be innovative,” he said.

Government cannot take risks exactly as a venture capital firm does, he acknowledged, but avoiding all risk makes progress impossible.

The same principles carried into the fireside chat with Howard, who asked Kupor why he left a lucrative career in venture capital for public service.

Kupor said he had long been interested in public policy, but his professional path took him elsewhere. Eventually, he saw an opportunity to bring his experience in organizational leadership to a challenge affecting the entire country.

He also wants students to reconsider what a federal career can offer. Government agencies need far more than policy specialists. They employ people in finance, human resources, information technology, operations, project management, cybersecurity and other fields familiar to graduates entering the private sector.

Yet the government has done a poor job communicating those opportunities, Kupor said. Its aging workforce makes that failure particularly urgent, creating a significant need to replenish the talent pipeline.

Kupor urged students to explore internships and early-career opportunities through earlycareers.gov, the federal government's resource for students and recent graduates. He said the administration aims to make one-third of new federal hires early-career employees, potentially opening tens of thousands of positions annually to younger workers.

His message was not that students must commit their entire careers to government. Instead, he encouraged them to give public service a chance, develop valuable skills and discover how their expertise might translate across sectors.

“Come work at the federal government, work on the hardest, most complex, most interesting problems, serve your country and serve yourself,” Kupor said.

For ASU students preparing to enter a rapidly changing workforce, the invitation was also a challenge: Look beyond familiar career paths and consider how their talents might help solve problems that affect millions of Americans.

The federal government's future, Kupor suggested, depends not only on recruiting a new generation of employees but also on building a system that allows them to do their best work.

“My main advice is to give us an opportunity to demonstrate to you that we can be the kind of employer that’s going to allow you to do good but also make sure that you’re actually advancing your career.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



U.S. Office of Personnel Management Director Scott Kupor speaks to nearly 25 Next Generation Service Corps students in Professor of Practice Brett Hunt’s PAF 315: Cross-Section Collaboration course on ASU's Tempe campus on Thursday, Oct. 22. Kupor encouraged students to consider a career in government service as a means to introduce fresh ideas and innovation before transitioning into the private sector. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Scott Kupor has a fireside chat with ASU Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Chris Howard in front of a large student audience during an Oct. 22 visit to ASU's Tempe campus.



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