



Campaign work paid off with federal jobs for early Obama supporters

By Luke Rosiak – July 11th, 2013

Among Leigh Ellen Arsenault's highest and most recent professional accomplishments was serving as captain of her college junior varsity field hockey team — that and the months she spent with the Obama campaign in 2008, toiling for \$24,000 a year after she signed on to help the then-senator from Illinois in the early primary state of New Hampshire.

Arsenault majored in political science at Middlebury College and had never held a job before betting on Obama. When he won, her reward was a political appointee slot that paid nearly \$80,000 annually at the U.S. Department of Education.

After his 2008 victory, President Obama filled at least 38 of 106 political appointee posts in the education department with former campaign workers, according to a *Washington Examiner* analysis of resumes and compensation records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

Another of the 38 was Jason P. Hoekstra, who had no college degree when he was hired as a \$120,000-a-year special assistant at the education department. His annual salary soon hit \$132,000. Hoekstra had accrued lots of goodwill as regional information technology manager for the Obama campaign, then as a member of the Obama-Biden transition team.

The closest thing Elizabeth Utrup had to education-related work experience was tutoring students in English during a semester in France before returning home to work as a bartender.

That's when she began volunteering for the campaign and soon found herself booking campaign chief Jim Messina's travel. Like Arsenault, Utrup's reward after the election was appointment as a special assistant, making just under \$80,000 a year at the Department of Education.

Most congressional staffers would likely envy well-paid executive branch appointees like Arsenault and Hoekstra because deferred compensation is the preferred pay-scale on the Hill.

Congressional staffers work long hours for low pay for a few years, knowing that their real paycheck comes later when they trade knowledge and connections for lucrative jobs on K Street.

Stakes can be even higher on the campaign trail, where there are no guarantees a candidate will amount to anything at all. But the rewards can be substantial for early believers who settled for scraps as an unknown candidate scrounged for donations.

The path Obama followed at the education department is little different from those of most of his Oval Office predecessors.

"When I was involved in going into the Reagan administration, one of the first questions asked by the presidential personnel office was, 'Did you do anything to help the president get elected?' They're not going to hire anyone who didn't," said Bob Moffit, a former Office of Personnel Management and Department of Health and Human Services appointee.

In some cases, that makes sense — a candidate will tap subject matter experts he trusts to formulate positions during the campaign, then come back to them to implement those policies in government.

Some accomplished professionals take big pay cuts, perhaps with the anticipation that a win could lead to a prestigious, high-level public service job. Amy Laitinen was development director at the University of Miami Medical School when she agreed to handle get-out-the-vote efforts in Wisconsin, a \$30,000-a-year job.

Luck was on her side: Obama won, and Laitinen was soon making \$112,000 in the education department.

Glenn A. Cummings had sizeable education and policy chops — but higher on the resume he sent to administration officials, and perhaps setting him apart from the pack, was the \$1.1 million he raised for the Obama campaign.

"The positions are created, as it were, to be doled out to people who are intimates to the president," said John Samples, a scholar at the Cato Institute. He compared them to lesser versions of "ambassadorships, where you have donors who raised a lot of money and don't have any particular diplomatic background, but then they always end up in places like Bermuda."

In both, he noted, despite a lack of experience, "maybe it's a good thing that he's the president's best friend," helping to channel the president and carry out his wishes.

The Department of Education told the *Washington Examiner* that campaigns allow young people to display talent and work ethic and noted that most campaign workers did not wind up with federal jobs.

"Previous political experience is neither a prerequisite nor a barrier for an appointment," the agency said in a statement, adding that it "seeks diverse, qualified applicants to fill positions at various levels. The political appointees currently serving at the department routinely work alongside career civil servants to fulfill our mission."