

Security Clearance Fact Sheet

American University Career Center

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General information

Many internships and jobs with government agencies, offices or contractors require students to work with sensitive information that may impact national security. These internships necessitate a background investigation for the purpose of granting a security clearance. A security clearance is a determination that an individual is eligible for access to national security information.

Investigations are initiated when a candidate has received a provisional internship or job offer. Applicants cannot be “pre-cleared” before having a job or internship offer. The clearance process is quite involved and currently usually takes four to six months to complete. Generally only US citizens are eligible to receive a security clearance.

There are three general levels of security clearance used at the Department of Defense (80% of clearances issued in the United States are for positions in the Department of Defense). Several other agencies also use these terms to describe their clearance levels, while some agencies have different descriptors. These levels are:

- **Confidential**, the unauthorized disclosure of which would “cause damage to the national security,”
- **Secret**, the unauthorized disclosure of which would “cause serious damage to the national security,”
- **Top Secret**, the unauthorized disclosure of which would “cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security.”

About the timeline

Student internships that deal with sensitive information often require a Confidential or Secret clearance. While investigations usually take four to six months to complete, higher clearance levels may take longer. Agencies with cyclical internship programs usually have set deadlines to apply. The deadline is usually seven months before the intended start of the internship. For example, the U.S. Department of State has a November application deadline for internships the following summer. Agencies that hire interns on an as-needed basis will have rolling deadlines that make it more challenging to predict an internship deadline. When planning ahead for interning or obtaining a job in a particular term, include in your projected application timeline the time it will likely take to obtain a clearance.

Issues that may come up

You will be assigned an agency contact during the investigation. It is important to respond to questions from the contact quickly. The officer can also provide updates when available. Unexpected delays can occur that extend the process. While some factors are completely outside of your control, there are steps you can take to be informed and prepared for the process, thus enhancing the likelihood of timely resolution.

Issues which can cause delays during a security clearance investigation, but are not necessarily disqualifications include:

- Incomplete/inaccurate application information
 - Only completed applications can move forward in the process
- Unusual financial instability/debt
 - Documented financial instability (student loans do not usually fall into this category)
- Overseas residence in personal history
 - Clearance investigations will incorporate foreign locations

- Family members are foreign nationals
 - The impact of foreign family and friends will be assessed
- Frequent address changes
 - All locations where you have lived will be investigated
- Criminal record
 - Will be researched for all applicants
- Documented mental health issues
 - Investigators will inquire if the applicant has taken appropriate steps toward treatment
- Illegal drug use
 - Different agencies have different standards. It is a good idea to stop immediately if you are currently engaging in illegal drug use. Some agencies and departments will require a certain number of years to pass since the illegal activity before they will consider a candidate.

Prepare for the Clearance Process

Be Completely Truthful

Share all information about your background fully and truthfully during an investigation. While there may be information that disqualifies you in the short term, the passage of time can allow you to be eligible in the future. An applicant found to be lying or omitting information will usually not be considered even for future positions.

Gather Personal Information

Download and complete an *SF86 2010 Questionnaire for National Security Positions*. You will still have to complete the official online version if you receive a provisional offer but collecting the information ahead of time may speed the investigation. You will need to compile information such as a list of foreign personal and professional contacts and all the specific addresses where you have lived, worked, and studied both in the US and abroad. The SF86 can be found at: <http://www.opm.gov/forms/standard-forms/>

Review Credit Report

Discrepancies between what you self-report on an SF86 and information revealed during an investigation will delay the investigation (or may result in a denial). The Federal Trade Commission recommends *annualcreditreport.com* to receive a credit report (not a credit score) for free once every 12 months. Obtain and review a free report and take steps to correct errors with the three credit reporting agencies. <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0155-free-credit-reports>

Meet with a Career Advisor and Academic Advisor

Career Advisors can help with questions you may have about clearances and can refer you to useful on-line resources such as http://www.clearancejobs.com/security_clearance_faq.pdf (see especially pages 5-8). Your Academic Advisor can provide guidance on how an internship for credit fits into your class schedule, especially if there is uncertainty about when your clearance will come through and allow you to commence work.