

**STATEMENT BY
LAUREL MCFARLAND
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND
ADMINISTRATION (NASPAA)**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT
MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**HEARING ON
“INSPIRING STUDENTS TO FEDERAL SERVICE”**

MAY 4, 2011

My name is Laurel McFarland, and I serve as the Executive Director of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), which has been committed to inspiring students to federal service for decades.

NASPAA is the organization of 275 graduate schools of public administration, public policy, and public affairs. Our member schools annually confer over 10,000 Master of Public Administration (MPA), Master of Public Policy (MPP), and related degrees. For forty years, NASPAA has been the accreditor of graduate programs in these fields and a force for promoting quality in professional education for public service.

In 1977, working in partnership with federal agencies, NASPAA helped to create what has become the Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF) program, as a vehicle for the federal government to attract the top talent coming out of our nation's graduate schools. It was clear that graduates with advanced training in analytical, quantitative, and writing skills, who also demonstrated strong leadership skills, were desperately needed in federal service – which remains even truer today.

Students pursue graduate degrees in public service because they believe that with the knowledge they'll gain, they'll be able to change the world. Generations of PMFs and other graduates have validated this belief and have applied it to distinguished federal careers. Compared to the total number of new hires, the federal government has not needed huge numbers of highly-trained graduates every year, but where it has needed them, it has *really* needed them. Thousands of graduates with advanced degrees in public policy, science and engineering, finance and information technology enter federal service annually. They represent the future leadership and management of the civil service.

Unfortunately, there is overwhelming evidence from recent years that the existing competitive hiring system does **not** work for graduate students, who have advanced knowledge and abilities, but little full-time work experience, especially in federal service. The current competitive hiring process gives significant weight to years of government service, but virtually none to cutting-edge skills. Fortunately, the President and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) recognize this, which they demonstrated by issuing December's "Pathways" Executive Order for Recruiting and Hiring Students and Recent Graduates. NASPAA applauds the President's and OPM's vision and courage.

But to make the Executive Order (EO) effective, and make it "stick," we will need:

- 1) A commitment from OPM to ensure that Pathways Programs meet the aspirations for high-performance government and effective recruitment as expressed in the EO.

- 2) Commitments from other federal agencies that they will use Pathways Programs to develop, not simply hire, skilled graduates.
- 3) Lasting and effective partnerships between federal agencies and universities.
- 4) Congressional oversight.

Two Roles for Congressional Oversight

Congress can do two critical things to ensure that the Pathways Programs are effectively used for hiring students for federal service. First, make the Pathway Programs work for *students*, not just for agencies, by creating pathways that are transparent and lead somewhere. While it is important to focus on the employer “demand” side, and to think strategically about how students, with their abundant skills and energy, can fill critical and hard-to-fill positions, it is just as important to look at the partnership from the student “supply” side, by creating programs that focus on drawing students into federal service, developing their talents, and retaining them.

Second, collecting good data is essential. Strategic analysis of student hiring data will serve to hold all Pathways stakeholders – OPM, other agencies, universities – accountable for creating a truly “high performance” hiring process.

A Better PMF

Students and recent graduates are not looking merely for jobs; they are looking for opportunities to develop careers, and attracting the best of them to federal service rests on being able to assure them that federal jobs will offer them a developmental opportunity. The Presidential Management Fellowship is the federal government’s flagship talent recruitment program for graduate students. The PMF selection process is notoriously long and rigorous. We think that’s a good thing. This year, fewer than 10% of PMF applicants made it through a multi-step process and were selected as finalists. Even then, finalists still had to compete for positions.

As part of the new Pathways Programs, the PMF program must promise the best and most capable graduate students around the country that the federal government provides a challenging, competitive opportunity to develop the leadership and management skills needed at the top. As a program designed to produce future federal leaders, the PMF should select, match, and convert candidates and participants based on the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ) developed for the Senior Executive Service. We should take the ECQ competencies, scale them back to the professional entry-level (e.g., GS-9 and GS-11) and then map them onto the knowledge, skills, and capacities we expect from PMFs.

We should be unabashed that the purpose of the PMF is to identify and develop future *leaders* (and senior managers/analysts) of the federal workforce. The adoption of a competency framework would provide the means to clearly demonstrate to students the intent of the program, and to hold the agencies accountable over time for the way they create PMF positions and

develop the fellows within those positions. Agencies should be assessed on their progress toward these goals; those that perform should be provided with recognition and incentives to do even better.

Congress should also review the performance of the PMF program from a student perspective as well as an agency one: are finalists being selected who match expected postings? What percentage of PMF finalists are successfully matched to open PMF positions? Are offers made in a timely fashion? Are the PMF positions posted by agencies consistent with the mission of the program?

The Recent Graduates Program

We also need a strong partnership between federal agencies and universities to give life to the Executive Order's "Recent Graduates" program. If we want this new program to be successful in drawing in recent graduates with the skills we need, it needs to be a two-way street: the Recent Graduates program should be open to recipients of degrees along the spectrum of postsecondary education, up to and including doctoral degrees. It must also be explicitly developmental for all its participants, providing professional and career-development opportunities, ideally identifying potential career paths for applicants.

Congress can provide effective oversight for this program by requiring that the agencies work with educators and professional associations to create Recent Graduates programs in specific functional areas that are linked to professional competency attainment. These areas should include hard-to-fill positions such as those in budgeting and financial management; public procurement and acquisition; IT and technical fields; and human resource management. The Recent Graduates program has great promise, but it will be squandered if we cannot work together to create something that benefits both graduates and agencies with critical skill needs.

A Partnership for Accountability

Second, we need a university-federal partnership based on accountability and transparency, which Congress can help ensure is created and maintained. Congress should use its oversight to ensure that OPM and client federal agencies collect the data that enable us to assess their performance in attracting the best and most critically needed students to federal service: data about how we are doing in recruiting, selecting, matching, employing, developing, and retaining. Last year's Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act (S. 736), which passed the Senate but not the House, included data provisions.¹ Congress should regularly review student hiring through

¹ S. 736 [111th]: SEC. 9. MEASURES OF FEDERAL HIRING EFFECTIVENESS. (a) In General- Each agency shall measure and collect information on indicators of hiring effectiveness with respect to the following : (1) RECRUITING AND HIRING-(A) Ability to reach and recruit highly qualified talent from diverse talent pools.(B) Use and impact of each hiring authority and flexibility to recruit most qualified applicants, including the use of student internships and scholarship programs as a talent pool for permanent hires. (C) Use and impact of special hiring authorities and flexibilities to recruit diverse candidates, including

the Pathways Programs, but must also monitor the fate of students attempting to participate in the competitive hiring system. We have a substantial trove of anecdotal evidence on how abysmal students' experience with USAJobs has been, but it would be helpful to know with greater certainty just how truly awful it is. And we need to find out if, and why, we're missing out on some of the best students.

Most importantly, it is absolutely critical to publish hiring data widely, so that the public, especially students and university career services professionals, can see it. The Administration's "open government initiative" should be used as a minimal standard. While the success of the Pathways Programs rests partially on their being seen as highly competitive, the pathways must also be clear and well-marked.

Conclusion

Partnerships between universities and federal agencies will be necessary in order to make federal student hiring efforts successful. Success will be defined both by the Pathways Programs' ability to serve the federal government's hiring needs *and* by their ability to provide federal opportunities for new professionals that offer real development opportunities connected to the skills they will need for senior positions and leadership as they advance in their careers. Ongoing working groups that bring federal agencies together with educators to establish the competency frameworks for various functional categories of government jobs will be required. As the primary organization concerned with professional education in public service, NASPAA is committed to working with federal and other partners to accomplish these important goals.

Ultimately, the Pathways Executive Order is not about the narrow task of hiring students and recent graduates. Federal hiring reform is about nothing less than ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government in the years ahead, and our ability to tackle the complicated public problems and fiscal pressures we will face. Today's students, especially the most talented, can and will make a critical contribution to tomorrow's federal government and our nation.

veteran, minority, and disabled candidates. (D) The age, educational level, and source of applicants. (E) Length of time between the time a position is advertised and the time a first offer of employment is made. (F) Length of time between the time a first offer of employment for a position is made and the time a new hire starts in that position. (G) Number of internal and external applicants for Federal positions. (H) Number of positions filled compared to the specific number in the annual workforce plan of the agency, with specific reference to mission-critical occupations or areas of critical shortage deficiencies. (I) Number of offers accepted compared to the number of offers made for permanent positions.