

**STATEMENT BY
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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT
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**HEARING ON
“INSPIRING STUDENTS TO FEDERAL SERVICE”**

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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 skills they'll gain, they'll be able to change the world. Generations of PMFs and other graduates have validated this belief by applying their education to solve problems throughout distinguished federal careers. Compared to the total of annual new hires, the number of highly-trained recent graduates hired by the federal government may seem small, but they play a vital role. Thousands of graduates with advanced degrees in public policy, science and engineering, finance, and information technology enter federal service annually, filling "hard to fill" and critical mission positions. They represent the future leadership and management of the civil service. Moreover, the policy challenges that MPP and MPA graduates have been trained to address are growing ever-more complex and global, requiring increasing levels of cutting-edge knowledge and advanced skills.

Unfortunately, there is overwhelming evidence from recent years that the existing competitive hiring system simply does not work for graduate students, who have advanced training, but little full-time work experience, especially in federal service. The current competitive hiring process gives significant weight to years of government service, but considerably less 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 into federal service. First, it can use its oversight to ensure that the Pathway Programs work for *students*, by creating pathways that are transparent and lead to further opportunities for federal service. 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, it can use oversight to ensure that both OPM and hiring agencies collect data and use it to produce meaningful analysis. Since good data and analysis are essential for program improvement, a good start would be to require annual reporting. In the longer term, Congress could also consider codifying some of OPM’s initiatives to ensure that future administrations can continue and be accountable for them. 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. 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 renowned for being rigorous and daunting, which we at NASPAA think is 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 a limited number of positions, and only around half may ultimately end up as PMFs.

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 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.

There are metrics by which the PMF program can be assessed to ensure that it is serving the needs of participants and agencies, as well as overall federal talent planning: are PMF finalists being selected who match anticipated postings? What percentage of 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, just like the PMF, it must serve both agencies and students. The Recent Graduates program should be open to recipients of degrees along the spectrum of postsecondary education, up to and including doctorates. 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 the promise 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

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. The Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act, which was co-sponsored by Senator Akaka and passed the Senate last year, included provisions requiring data collection.¹ An updated bill is currently being drafted, and NASPAA fully supports its reintroduction in this session. Recently, the House passed the text of Rep. Gerald Connolly's Federal Internship Improvement Act (HR 914), which would require data collection and reporting for all internship programs.

Congress's oversight of the Pathways Programs is important. But it is just as critical that Congress monitor how the competitive hiring system treats student applicants. There is a substantial amount of anecdotal evidence on how abysmal graduate students' experience with

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 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.

USAJobs.gov has been, in terms of feedback and communication to applicants as well as overall hiring success. Even our top-ranked member schools report that few, if any, of their graduates have ever been contacted for an interview based on an application submitted through USAJobs.gov. The vast majority of graduate students hired in recent years have entered federal service through excepted hiring. It would be helpful to know with greater certainty exactly how students fare in the competitive hiring system, and for that we need data. We need to find out if, and why, the federal government has failed to hire some of its best applicants.

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. These opportunities must offer real development opportunities connected to the skills needed for senior positions and leadership, as Pathways graduates 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.

Laurel McFarland

Laurel McFarland has served as Executive Director of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) since 2005. She oversees NASPAA's efforts in accreditation and quality assurance, membership support and growth, data research, public affairs, communications and marketing, and NASPAA's academic journal on teaching and learning, the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*. She established the NASPAA Data Center in public affairs education in order to enhance understanding and competitiveness of the sector, initiated outreach to form international partnerships in public affairs education, and has expanded the association's involvement in the reform of federal hiring of graduate students. Laurel previously held positions at the National Academy of Sciences, the European Commission, and the Brookings Institution. She is a summa cum laude graduate of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and completed graduate studies in economics at Oxford University.