

The Pathways Programs: Clearing the Way to Entry-level Federal Employment

by Maria Hibbard

For aspiring attorneys and recent graduates of all disciplines, the journey to federal employment has long been regarded as something of a mystery. Student internships were hard to learn about and even harder to obtain, and recent graduates were hired into indefinite “intern” positions that only sometimes transitioned into permanent employment. Thanks to comprehensive hiring reform by the Obama administration, though, the mystery is gradually becoming clearer.

The central piece of this hiring reform, the Pathways Program, aims to standardize, streamline, and add transparency to entry-level federal hiring by creating three clear “pathways”: (1) an internship program for current students, (2) a recent graduates’ program open to students up to two years after receiving their degrees, and (3) a revitalized post-graduate Presidential Management Fellows program for those interested in policy and management in the federal government.

Although many federal government internship programs and entry-level Attorney Honors Programs will remain intact, these new programs will build on past entry-level hiring initiatives and hopefully motivate more of the strongest applicants to start their careers in federal government. As mandated by President Obama’s Executive Order 13562, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) created the Pathways Programs with five core principles in mind: limited scope, transparency, fairness to veterans, agency investment, and OPM oversight. These principles can be seen through a review of the specifics of each program.

Internships

The Pathways Internship Program replaces the old Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) and the Student Career Experience Programs (SCEP), providing part-time and full-time opportunities for students in high school through graduate school. Through this program, students hired into internships can be eligible for, but are not entitled to, conversion into permanent positions after the completion of 640 successful hours (roughly 18 work weeks) of service. Up to half of these hours can be waived for interns who demonstrate high potential as evidenced by high academic and on-the-job performance.

Unlike the programs before Pathways, the Pathways Internship Program specifies that interns must do “meaningful developmental work” related to their career field of interest and be subjected to performance reviews. Because of the broad variety of the work that agencies complete, however, OPM has left the definition of this “meaningful developmental work” to the discretion of individual agencies.

Recent Graduates

The Pathways Recent Graduate Program replaces the Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP). Unlike the FCIP, students are eligible for positions in this program for up to two years after receiving their degrees. These developmental one-year positions, meant to help transition recruits into becoming successful career civil servants, include 40 hours of interactive training and mentorship opportunities. After the completion of the one-year period, Pathways participants can be evaluated based on the agency’s normal education and skill requirements

for consideration for conversion into a permanent position. Although Pathways participants may have some advantage in this evaluation process because of the developmental nature of the Pathways positions, they are not automatically entitled to conversion. Individual agencies still have the discretion to coordinate these mentorship opportunities and evaluations, but OPM oversight will work to develop consistency throughout the federal government.

Presidential Management Fellowship

Lastly, the Executive Order mandated an overhaul of the Presidential Management Fellows Program (PMF). This competitive program that recruits masters, law, and doctoral-level graduate students to policy and management jobs in the federal government has long been regarded as one of the most prestigious ways to begin a career in federal service. The revitalized PMF program changes the eligibility for the program in two major ways: students can now apply for this program for up to two years after receiving their degrees, and applicants no longer need to secure a nomination from their schools. Ideally, not requiring a nomination will actually make the process more competitive — strong applicants who might not have received a school nomination can now apply.

Finalists for this program, which often receives thousands of applications for 500 to 700 positions, have one year to apply for specially designated management or policy-related PMF Positions. Once in these positions, PMF participants are mentored by senior members of their agencies throughout the program. They also must complete a two-year development plan and 160 hours of training, but all PMF fellows are eligible for conversion into permanent positions at the end of the program.

Unchanged Programs

While the Pathways Internship, Recent Graduate, and PMF programs reinvigorate much of the federal hiring processes for entry-level positions,

many recruitment systems will remain the same throughout the transition. The Pathways Program is simply intended to be an additional method to recruit qualified individuals to the excepted service; competitive service entry-level positions still exist. (Excepted service positions can be filled internally by current government employees; competitive service positions must be advertised to the general public.) Agencies still have the ability to run unpaid internship programs, and attorney honors programs will continue to be administered by individual agencies.

Pathways Yet Discovered

As the first round of recruitment for Pathways positions takes place in fall 2012, many details about the Pathways programs are still uncertain. Agencies have a six-month grace period to convert current interns into Pathways participants and start hiring applicants under the new regulations, and no recent graduates can be hired until an agency signs a memorandum of understanding with OPM. Although many questions remain, because of the programs' increased OPM oversight, additional transparency about available positions, and more structured opportunities for conversion, the Pathways programs seem set to help the federal government recruit and retain the best and the brightest candidates. Student interns and recent graduates in the legal sector and beyond can now look down a brighter "pathway" to federal employment.

More information about these programs and job listings can be found on USAJobs at <http://www.usajobs.gov/studentsandgrads>. Complete information about federal government careers can also be found in the "Resource Center" section of PSJD (formerly PSLawNet).

Maria Hibbard, a 2L at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, served as NALP's 2012 Summer Publications Coordinator, during which time she researched recent changes to federal hiring processes.