



Pathways Programs proposed regulations Summary and analysis

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On August 4, the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released proposed regulations to set up the [Pathways Programs](#) for Students and Recent Graduates: new federal-wide Internship and Recent Graduates programs, and a strengthened Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program. The programs were created by an Executive Order, signed by President Obama last December.



The Pathways Programs are critical for graduates of public affairs schools who want to pursue a meaningful federal career. Overall, the proposed regulations create a framework for programs that can recruit the nation's best students and develop them to produce future generations of federal professionals and leaders, but that are also rigorous and accountable.

OPM is currently [accepting feedback](#) on the proposed regulations during a Public Comment period **through October 4**. NASPAA will be providing formal feedback and recommendations, and encourages member schools, students, and alumni to provide substantive comments as well.

This document presents:

1. A summary of key and relevant provisions in the proposed regulations
2. Provisions that NASPAA believes should be retained in the final regulations
3. Provisions that NASPAA believes should be changed in the final regulations
4. Information on submitting comments

1. **Summary of provisions**

Programs overall

- Graduate students, including doctoral students, would be eligible for all 3 programs: Internship, Recent Graduates, and PMF
- The programs' sizes are not capped
 - OPM will monitor agencies' use of the programs, and could later implement a cap if it deems necessary. Any cap would apply to the number of conversions to permanent positions, not the number of participants
- Completing a Pathways Program does not guarantee conversion to a permanent federal position
- All 3 programs have a strong developmental component, including training and mentoring
- The regulations do not mention funding

Presidential Management Fellows program

- Eligibility is widened to those who have graduated within the preceding two years [per the EO]
- PMF is still restricted to those who have received an "advanced degree" [per the EO]
- The school nomination would be eliminated
- Hiring level remains at GS-9, 11, or 12 (with promotion ability to 13)
- Fellows would no longer be automatically eligible for conversion to permanent positions upon satisfactory completion of the program
- The "Senior Fellow" designation, which was never implemented, would be eliminated

- The option for a one-year extension would be eliminated
- Fellows would continue to receive 80 hours of training each year
- Formal classroom training would be replaced with “interactive” training
- Agencies would be required to provide fellows with a mentor from the SES (or highest available)
- All fellows would be required to receive at least one 4-6 months’ “developmental assignment”

Recent Graduates program

- Eligibility includes Associate’s through doctorates, plus vocational/technical diploma/certificates
- Students will be able to apply up to two years after they graduate (6 years for active-duty military) [per the EO]
- All positions would last two years
- Hiring level would be capped at GS-9, except for PhDs in STEM fields and for “scientific and professional research” positions, which would be eligible for GS-11 or 12
- All positions would be developmental; participants would have to be provided with orientation, mentoring, and 40 hours of training each year

Internship program

- Will replace STEP and SCEP, which would be eliminated
- Eligibility would include students in high school through graduate school
 - Students would be eligible after acceptance into a program, even before they enroll
- All Internships would be paid
- Interns could be hired at any pay grade level
- Internships would not be required to be in the student's field of study
 - The minimum hours required to be completed to be eligible for conversion would be 320 for positions directly related to student’s field of study, and 640 for positions outside the field
- The three-way agreement between school, student and agency to be eliminated and replaced by two-party agency-student agreement

For more information on the three programs, see OPM’s [one-page summaries](#).

2. Key provisions that should be retained in the final regulations

A number of provisions would be beneficial to students in public affairs fields and would contribute to “good government”. These should be retained:

- Graduate students, including those at the doctoral level, would be eligible for all three programs
 - Future federal hiring needs require attracting highly educated, highly skilled talent through as many channels as possible.
- The programs’ sizes are not capped, and there are not pre-determined caps on the number of conversions to permanent positions
 - The size of the programs should reflect market demand, limited only by agency hiring needs. An analysis of federal hiring data shows that any cap on either the programs’ size or the number of conversions would be unnecessary and not based on research or evidence.
- All three programs have a strong developmental component, including training and mentoring

- Graduates who are well-educated but may have little career experience will greatly benefit from professional development, and the investment in new talent will pay substantial dividends for the federal workforce. The developmental component is one of the characteristics that set the Pathways Programs apart from being simply “hiring authorities”.
- OPM oversight of agencies’ use of the programs
 - There should be oversight of agencies that they are creating robust programs that benefit participants, fit into agencies’ workforce planning, and are not misused.

3. Provisions that should be changed in the final regulations

There are also two provisions that, if left intact, would prevent the Pathways programs from realizing their full potential of attracting the nation’s best students to federal service:

- Recent Graduates positions would be capped at the GS-9 level, except for PhDs in STEM fields and for “scientific or professional research” positions, which would be eligible for GS-11 or 12.

While the regulations explain that “the Recent Graduates Program is intended to be a program for people seeking entry-level jobs who lack experience to compete,” these would be two pay grades below the hiring level for a substantial number of recent graduates, at both the master’s and PhD levels, in both STEM and non-STEM fields. This is especially true for graduates with prior work experience. The Pathways programs must be able to attract top graduate students in all fields.

The provisions related to Recent Graduates pay grade should be expanded to allow hires at the GS-11/12 levels for master’s recipients with prior work experience and for PhD graduates in all fields.

- Standards for eligible students and education programs lack precise definitions. There are three areas where this is most evident:
 - All 3 programs, even PMF, would include graduates of “certificate” programs, without a definition or minimum program length specified.
 - The regulations use terms for educational program and degree level, such as “advanced degree” and “post-graduate”, which are no longer used by the Department of Education and do not have standard definitions.
 - The Internship program includes those who are merely “accepted”, not solely enrolled students.

A strength of the programs is that they are focused on a vital target group. To prevent abuse, participants and programs should be clearly identified. The final regulations should include clear, precise definitions of eligible student populations and qualifying educational programs, using only currently-used terms and widely accepted definitions.

There are also a number of critical aspects of the Pathways Programs that the regulations appropriately do not address, such as recruiting, selection, assessment, implementation, and data collection. Policies for these matters are best left to the sub-regulatory/guidance level.

4. Submitting comments on the proposed regulations

OPM is accepting Public Comments during a 60-day period that ends **Tuesday, October 4**.

To make it easier for the public to comment, OPM has created a direct link to the Regulations.gov page: www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=OPM-2011-0033-0001

Comments can be e-mailed to employ@opm.gov, or submitted by mail or fax. Details are posted at www.opm.gov/HiringReform/Pathways/.