

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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	OPI: Office of Human Resources Management

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1. PURPOSE

This directive establishes the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) policy for the implementation of the USDA Pathways Programs.

2. SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS

This is a new policy.

3. POLICY

All Agencies and Staff Offices will comply with and institute the policies in this directive, and in the USDA Pathways Programs Handbook.

Agencies and Staff Offices do not have the flexibility to modify or customize the policies provided in this directive for their Agency or Staff Office, without formal written approval from the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM).

All USDA Scholarship programs that include opportunities for participants to have a Pathways internship position must be publicly announced via the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) job posting system and filled in compliance with Pathways and excepted service employment regulations. Recruiting must target agricultural and biological sciences as well as other USDA mission related academic fields of study regardless of the academic institution. Recruiters and those who are not Human Resources (HR) Operations staff involved in staffing these scholarship/internship positions must not accept resumes/applications from students nor have any role in the evaluation of candidates. Scholarship program offices must work with their HR Operations staff to comply with regulations at [5 CFR 362.302](#) and adhere to policy outlined herein and carried out in accordance with the USDA Pathways Program Handbook to fill all scholarship Pathways internship positions. Refer to the Job Opportunity Announcement (JOA) Desk Aids, "What to Expect Next" to obtain required language to use when advertising all Pathways internships associated with scholarships. Participation in the Pathways Programs must conform to Federal, State, or local laws and standards governing the employment of minors.

4. SCOPE

This directive applies to all USDA Agencies and Staff Offices who hire individuals in the USDA Pathways Programs. The USDA Pathways Programs consist of the Internship Program, the Recent Graduates Program, and the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program. The USDA Pathways Programs will be departmental in scope and focus on preparing individuals for USDA mission area careers.

5. AUTHORITIES

This policy must be used in conjunction with:

- a. 5 CFR Part 362 - Pathways Programs [5 CFR Part 362](#)
- b. 5 CFR Part 213 – Excepted Service [5 CFR Part 213](#)
- c. 5 CFR Part 250 - Personnel Management Agencies [5 CFR Part 250](#)
- d. Executive Order 13562 - Recruiting and Hiring Students and Recent Graduates [Executive Order 13562](#)
- e. 5 CFR Part 302 - Employment in the Excepted Service [5 CFR Part 302](#)
- f. 5 CFR Part 610 - Hours of Duty [5 CFR Part 610](#)
- g. 5 CFR Part 430 - Performance Management [5 CFR Part 430](#)
- h. 5 CFR Part 890 - Federal Employees Health Benefits Program [5 CFR Part 890](#)
- i. 5 CFR Part 536 - Grade and Pay Retention [5 CFR Part 536](#)
- j. 5 CFR Part 531 - Pay under the General Schedule [5 CFR Part 531](#)
- k. 5 CFR Part 731 – Suitability [5 CFR Part 731](#)
- l. 5 CFR Part 630 – Absence and Leave [5 CFR Part 630](#)
- m. [7 USC 2279c – Student Internship Programs](#)

6. DELEGATIONS

Established by Executive Order 13562, signed December 27, 2010, the final OPM rule implementing the Pathways Program for all federal agencies, including USDA, became effective on July 10, 2012.

OPM delegated OHRM the authority to implement and maintain oversight of the USDA Pathways Programs. Therefore, OHRM reserves the authority to limit, provide guidance, and oversee the recruitment, selection, hiring, promotion, and retention of students and recent graduates in the USDA Pathways Programs as well as other student and recent graduate employment programs that do not fall under the Pathways Programs.

OHRM also reserves the authority to develop and/or oversee the implementation of a standardized training curriculum for students and recent graduates, performance management programs, mentoring and shadowing programs, orientation and Individual Development Plan completion, extension requests, break in program requests, and on-boarding for students and recent graduates.

OHRM delegates Agencies and Staff Offices the authority and/or responsibility to:

- a. Adhere to caps on conversions to career-conditional and/or Term appointments;
- b. Provide information on the USDA Pathways Programs usage in the Annual Human Capital Management Report;
- c. Establish and ensure that an Agency or Staff Office designee signs a USDA Pathways Programs Participant Agreement for each participant;
- d. Apply veterans' preference laws and procedures when recruiting and selecting individuals for Pathways Programs opportunities;
- e. Ensure that the designated HR operations office advertises positions, and accepts and evaluates all applications for the selection and hiring of all applicants/candidates under the Pathways Programs;
- f. Establish and implement a mentoring and shadowing program;
- g. Provide orientation, ensure the completion and execution of an Individual Development Plan, and establish and implement an on-boarding program;
- h. Establish work schedules; and

- i. Participate in career and recruitment fairs in accordance with the USDA Pathways Programs Handbook.

The Director of OHRM may withdraw the above mentioned authorities and responsibilities from Agencies and/or Staff Offices and is authorized to issue special instructions on the use of these delegated authorities.

7. RESPONSIBILITIES

- a. Director of the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) shall:

- (1) Execute a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with OPM for the administration and use of the USDA Pathways Programs, according to the provisions of the merit system principles specified in 5 CFR Part 362;
- (2) Maintain oversight of the USDA Pathways Programs, including collecting data for the Human Capital Management Report;
- (3) Provide information to OPM regarding the job opportunities which fall under the USDA Pathways Programs;
- (4) Provide leadership and policy guidance;
- (5) Delegate authority to the USDA Pathways Programs Officer to oversee and monitor the management of the Program; and
- (6) Ensure that the Mission Area/Agency Human Resources Directors (MAHRDs) conduct periodic reviews to measure the quality and effectiveness of the program.

- b. Provost, Virtual University, shall:

- (1) Provide USDA Pathways Programs participants with career and professional development training using USDA's AgLearn Learning Management System; and
- (2) Train HR Professionals, Hiring Managers, Recruiters, and Student Coordinators in USDA's Pathways Programs best practices.

- c. USDA Pathways Programs Officer:

The USDA Pathways Programs Officer is responsible for providing the overall management and administration of the USDA Pathways Programs. The USDA Pathways Programs Officer shall:

- (1) Serve as a liaison between OPM and MAHRDs by providing implementation updates, clarifying technical and programmatic issues, and best practices;

- (2) Approve and disapprove breaks in programs;
 - (3) Monitor the management of the USDA Pathways Programs;
 - (4) Periodically evaluate the implementation of the USDA Pathways Programs and make changes as needed; and
 - (5) Attend related training as applicable.
- d. Mission Area Human Resources Directors (MAHRDs) shall:
- (1) Comply with the USDA Pathways Programs requirements, as described in the OPM-USDA MOU, USDA Pathways Programs Handbook, and this DR;
 - (2) Provide OHRM with Pathways Programs data in an effort to ensure Program compliance;
 - (3) Ensure compliance in the implementation of the Program;
 - (4) Ensure Program objectives are met by line managers and staff in their areas of responsibility;
 - (5) Ensure opportunities are consistent with positions identified in workforce and recruitment plans or other appropriate Mission Area/Agency plans;
 - (6) Ensure USDA Pathways participants meet OPM qualifications and educational standards and that Veterans' preference laws are complied with;
 - (7) Notify the USDA PMF Coordinator 30 days prior to a PMF appointment;
 - (8) Ensure that Agencies and Staff Offices have sufficient appropriations and resources to support the requirements of the program beyond salary and benefits including:
 - (a) OPM fee for PMFs;
 - (b) Training;
 - (c) Travel;
 - (d) Developmental rotation(s); and
 - (e) Other related expenses.

- (9) Ensure that USDA Agency and Staff Office supervisors who wish to hire a PMF receive the approval of the first level SES in their Agency chain of command;
 - (10) Approve/Disapprove Extension Requests;
 - (11) Ensure that USDA Agencies and Staff Offices evaluate the value and effectiveness of their PMF Programs and provide a copy of the evaluation to Virtual University Provost on September 1 of each year;
 - (12) Agencies and Staff Offices will provide orientation to each Pathways Participant, assign mentors within 90 days of appointment, provide a rotational experience, establish an Individual Development Plan (IDP) within 45 days of appointment, and provide students and recent graduates with a minimum of 40 hours of formal, interactive training per year, and PMFs with 80 hours of training per year, for 2 years, as outlined in the Virtual University USDA Pathways Programs Training and Development Plan.
- e. Recruiters shall:
- (1) Ensure that all vacancies are publicly posted, in accordance with 5 CFR 362.203;
 - (2) Prior to the event, ensure recruitment/job fairs are publicly posted if Pathways positions are available;
 - (3) Refrain from collecting applications/resumes from prospective applicants onsite at any and all career and recruitment fairs/events unless public notification requirements have been met and the event has been approved by the USDA Pathways Program Officer;
 - (4) Recruit from a diverse student population, in accordance with USDA's recruitment plans;
 - (5) Maintain records of recruitment sources;
 - (6) Participate in periodic USDA Pathways Programs training;
 - (7) Refer students to Student Coordinators; and
 - (8) Understand and adhere to USDA's Pathways Programs recruitment plans.
- f. Student Employment Program Coordinators shall:
- (1) Keep abreast of Mission Area/ Pathways Programs vacancies;

- (2) Participate in Mission Area/Agency recruitment plan development to ensure Pathways Programs goals are properly established;
- (3) Ensure supervisors identify training and educational needs which will allow interns to develop the competencies appropriate to the Mission Area/Agency;
- (4) Ensure all USDA Pathways Programs vacancies are publicly posted before selections are made;
- (5) Acknowledge receipt of Break in the Program and Extension Requests;
- (6) Ensure that each Pathways Participant receives Orientation and On-boarding training;
- (7) Participate in periodic USDA Pathways Programs training;
- (8) Monitor Pathways Programs participant's progress, maintain records and copies of approved extension requests forms, organize and analyze statistical data required for program review, administration, and evaluation.

g. Managers and Supervisors shall:

- (1) Work effectively with all USDA Pathways participants;
- (2) Authorize meetings between Pathways participants to provide performance feedback
- (3) Ensure that each Pathways participant receives orientation and On-boarding training;
- (4) Ensure that experienced employees are available to serve as mentors;
- (5) Ensure that Pathways participants develop an IDP;
- (6) Ensure that each USDA Pathways participant signs a USDA Pathways Programs Participant Agreement;
- (7) Ensure the completion of the USDA Pathways Programs Training Plan;
- (8) Participate in periodic USDA Pathways Programs training;
- (9) Coordinate and support a 4-6 month rotational assignment for PMF's;
- (10) Complete a performance management plan for all USDA Pathways participants;
and

(11) Submit Break in Program and Extension Requests timely.

h. Human Resources Practitioners shall:

- (1) Apply applicable veterans' preference rules to all applicants;
- (2) Adjudicate the applicant's suitability and verify his or her qualifications;
- (3) Work directly with the participants of the USDA Pathways Programs to offer assistance with HR services,
- (4) Ensure that each Pathways participant receives orientation and on-boarding training;
- (5) Implement the Agency's USDA Pathways Programs in a fair and equal environment;
- (6) Ensure that each Pathways participant signs a USDA Pathways Programs Participant Agreement;
- (7) Acknowledge, sign, and date the Break in the Program and Extension Requests Forms as needed;
- (8) Keep accurate records of the Agency's Break in Program and Extension Requests;
- (9) Participate in periodic USDA Pathways Programs training;
- (10) Publicly post all internship job opportunities, as outlined in 5 CFR 362.203; use the Schedule D hiring authority when hiring USDA Pathways Students and Recent Graduates; and ensure that applicants for intern positions meet the definition of a student, as specified in 5 CFR 362.202; and
- (11) Ensure compliance with applicable negotiated agreements regarding the Pathways Program and participants.

i. Executive Resources Board (ERB) shall:

- (1) Review current and proposed Presidential Management Fellow (PMF) policies for adequacy;
- (2) Ensure USDA PMF provisions are consistent with the Department's mission and strategic planning objectives, priorities and goals established by the Secretary and law;

- (3) Review and approve or disapprove agency requests for extension of a PMF's appointment and PMF conversions. Review current and proposed PMF policies for adequacy.

j. Mentors shall:

- (1) Assist USDA Pathways participants in identifying, developing, and implementing mentoring goals;
- (2) Provide a network for the USDA Pathways participant for accessing career guidance and growth opportunities;
- (3) Meet regularly with Pathways participants, in person or by telephone, for the duration of the program;
- (4) Provide constructive feedback;
- (5) Recognize and validate signs of professional growth and development in the Pathways participant/protégé;
- (6) Advise on relevant training needs and opportunities; and
- (7) Share knowledge and insights and create opportunities for professional exposure.

k. Civil Rights Office:

The Civil Rights Office will assist supervisors and managers with outreach activities, in accordance with the USDA Pathways Programs Handbook and this directive.

8. THE USDA PATHWAYS PROGRAMS

a. USDA Internship Program

- (1) Agencies and Staff Offices may recruit and appoint individuals who meet the definition of a student in the Internship Program and all the qualifications and requirements of the position being filled. A student is an individual who is in high school, a home-school program, rehabilitation or vocation school, a 1-year full-time certificate program, or in an undergraduate or graduate school program. All interns will be referred to as "Student Trainees". Student Trainees are appointed as either Student Trainees with Not to Exceed (NTE) dates or Student Trainees without NTE dates. Agencies and Staff Offices should provide Student Trainees with meaningful developmental work related to the student's academic or career goals and appoint Student Trainees (with NTE dates) on a temporary basis. The Student Trainee's assignments may be labor intensive activities not requiring subject matter expertise. Student Trainees (without NTE dates) will be appointed

until graduation requirements are met and provided developmental assignments related to the student's academic or career goals. (See 5 CFR 362.203(d)(3)). Non-citizens may be appointed to Recent Graduate positions under provisions identified in the USDA Pathways Handbook. However, citizenship is required prior to conversion to a competitive service appointment.

- (2) A recruitment plan for the USDA Pathways Programs is vital to USDA's workforce. The Department's priorities of full utilization of hiring flexibilities and Cultural Transformation should be considered when filling positions in order to meet workforce diversity goals.
- (3) Agencies and Staff Offices will publicly post all internship opportunities in USAJOBS for a minimum of 5 business days and only hire individuals who meet the definition of "student". The announcement must provide information on how to apply, position title, series and grade (career ladders have to be identified in the vacancy announcement), geographic location of the position, and provide a point of contact for those seeking more information about how to apply to Internship opportunities.
- (4) Outreach with local universities, state employment offices and disability and veterans' service offices should also be completed.
- (5) Pathways participants whose positions are under the General Schedule (GS) or comparable pay plan must be classified as Student Trainees, in the -99 (i.e. 299, 399, etc.) series of the appropriate occupational group. Pathways participants whose positions are under the Federal Wage System (FWS) will be classified as Student Trainees, in the -01 series of the appropriate occupational group.
- (6) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices must make appointments that adhere to the qualifications standard established by OPM for the Schedule D, Pathways Internship positions and grade level. Appointments may be made to any position for which the individual is qualified. The duties of the position to which the individual is appointed should be related to either the student trainees' academic or career goals. Student Trainees being considered for positions with a positive education requirement (e.g., biologist, geologist, etc.) must be directly enrolled in a related degree program. Veteran's preference applies in the evaluation of qualified applicants for all USDA Pathways Program positions in accordance with the provisions of 5 CFR Part 302.
- (7) Agencies and Staff Offices must make appointments to the USDA Internship Program, pursuant to USDA's Pathways Program MOU using the Schedule D excepted service appointing authority provided in 5 CFR 213.3402(a). Applicants will be evaluated and arranged in compliance with 5 CFR Part 302 excepted service appointments.

- (8) A Student Trainee serving under a temporary appointment NTE 1 year, who has not completed 1 year of service, is in excepted service Tenure Group 0. An Intern serving under a temporary appointment NTE 1 year, who has completed 1 year of current, continuous service, is in excepted service Tenure Group III. (See 5 CFR 362.205(a)(1)(ii) and (iii)).
- (9) A Student Trainee without NTE dates serving under an appointment for an initial period expected to last more than 1 year is in excepted service Tenure Group II for purposes of 5 CFR 362.205(a)(1) and afforded the same retention rights as other excepted service employees. Appointments are subject to all laws, regulations, and policies governing equal employment opportunity.
- (10) A Pathways Program Participant Agreement must be signed by the Student Trainee and Agency designee. Participant agreements must be completed prior to the Student Trainee's entrance-on duty (EOD) and signed by the student for each academic year. The agreement must describe the general description of duties; evaluation procedures that will be used for the participant; requirements for continuation and successful completion of the program; work schedules; minimum eligibility requirements for non-competitive conversion to term or permanent competitive service employment according to the requirements of the applicable Pathways Program; and the length of the appointment and termination date. (5 CFR Part 362).
- (11) An intermittent schedule is prohibited under the USDA Pathways Programs. A Student Trainee may work a full-time or part-time schedule. Supervisors are responsible for establishing a work schedule for Student Trainees in accordance with 5 CFR 610.121. The work schedule should not interfere with the Student Trainee's academic schedule. Supervisors and Student Trainees should agree on a formally-arranged schedule of school and work so that:
 - (a) Work responsibilities do not interfere with academic performance;
 - (b) Completion of the educational program (awarding of diploma/certificate/degree) and the Internship Program is accomplished in a reasonable and appropriate timeframe;
 - (c) The Supervisor is informed and prepared for the student's periods of employment; and
 - (d) Requirements for non-competitive conversion to term or permanent position in the competitive service are understood by all parties.
- (12) Student Trainees may or may not be eligible for telework. For more information on Telework, see USDA DR 4080-811-002.

- (13) Student Trainees must serve a 2 year trial period. Prior Federal civilian service is credited toward the completion of the required trial period in the same manner as prescribed in 5 CFR 315.802.
- (14) Student Trainees may be placed in a bargaining unit position and as such are included in the Local bargaining unit (BU). Orientations for student trainees identified as eligible bargaining unit employees will include any negotiated orientation requirements outlined in the applicable collective bargaining agreements. Hiring managers shall check with their HR Practitioner or Labor Relations staff for a determination on whether or not the position is a bargaining or non-bargaining position.
- (15) Travel payments and reimbursements and lodging payments are subject to Agency/Mission Area regulations. Student Trainees are not eligible for relocation expenses upon initial appointment to the USDA Pathways Intern Program. At the discretion of the Agency/Mission Area, Student Trainees may or may not be eligible for a relocation allowance when assigned to a permanent position upon completion of their academic program.
- (16) USDA on-boarding requirements require responsible stewardship of resources and accountability for the strategic management of human resources, including the successful acclimation of new employees into the workplace (USDA DR 4720-001). To achieve this goal, USDA has established a uniform framework for orienting new employees to the workplace. Agencies and Staff Offices will ensure that each Student Trainee receives on-boarding materials. It is the Agency/Staff Office's responsibility to ensure that each Student Trainee receives orientation. The Agency's Employee Orientation Program provides information on employee benefits, ethics, conduct, etc. The Student Trainee should be provided additional orientation in accordance with the participant agreement.
- (17) IDPs are required for all Students who are expected to serve 90 days or more in a consecutive 12-month period. IDPs must be completed within 45 days of the employee's appointment into the Pathways Program. The supervisor and employee meet annually to update the employee's IDP.
- (18) Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that a Mentor is assigned to the Student, within 90 days of appointment, provided a shadowing experience and a minimum of 40 hours of formal, interactive training over the duration of their internship.
- (19) Student Trainees are eligible for federal health benefits in accordance with 5 CFR Part 890 and described in the USDA Pathways Handbook. Student Trainees are eligible for annual and sick leave when in a pay status in accordance with 5 CFR Part 630.

- (20) Prior to conversion to a term or career or career conditional appointment, Student Trainees must be a U.S. citizen and satisfactorily complete all training, 640 work hours, program and educational requirements, as prescribed in the USDA Pathways Handbook.
- (21) Student Trainees with or without NTE dates are eligible for conversion to term, career or career conditional appointments if specified in the vacancy announcement to which they applied and upon meeting the program requirements. Student Trainees should be converted to the same line of work they were initially appointed to.
- (22) Subject to any limits on conversion imposed by the OPM Director, USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may non-competitively convert an eligible Intern to a term or permanent competitive service position.
- (23) A Student Trainee who is non-competitively converted to a competitive service term appointment may be subsequently converted non-competitively to a permanent competitive service position. Non-competitive conversion may be to a position within the same agency or any other agency within the Federal Government.
- (24) Time spent serving as a Student Trainee counts towards career tenure when the individual is non-competitively converted to a permanent position in the competitive service upon completion of the program in accordance with 5 CFR 315.802.
- (25) Service in the Pathways Program confers no right to further employment in either the competitive or excepted service. An agency wishing to convert a student must therefore execute the required action to do so within 120 days of successful completion of the degree and program requirements.
- (26) If for some reason other than poor performance, misconduct or suitability, the Agency/Staff Office is unable to place the participant, the employing unit should explore placement opportunities with other units or Federal agencies at least 90 days prior to the end of the Intern's eligibility period.
- (27) A Student Trainee converted to a full-time career or career-conditional position in the competitive service under this section does not have to serve a probationary period and acquires competitive status immediately upon conversion. The probationary period for career/career conditional employees is one year per 5 CFR 315.802. The entire period served under the Internship Program counts towards the probationary period. If the Intern works less than one year prior to conversion to the competitive service, they need to work the additional time after conversion to complete the probationary period. Time spent serving as a Pathways Programs participant counts towards career tenure when the individual is non-competitively

converted to a permanent position in the competitive service upon completion of the program, with or without an intervening term appointment, and without a break in service of one day.

- (28) A Student Trainee whose appointment is converted to career or career conditional becomes a career employee upon completing the service requirement for career tenure or is excepted in accordance with 5 CFR 315.201.
- (29) NTE Student Trainees may be extended in NTE 1 year increments (NTE 8 years), as long as the Intern NTE continues to meet the program eligibility requirements. (See 5 CFR 213.104(b)(3)(ii)). Supervisors must submit a request for an extension to their MAHRD, 45 days prior to the end of the initial NTE date.
- (30) Student Trainee without a NTE date shall not exceed 8 years.
- (31) In rare cases, Student Trainees and their respective supervisors may need to request a break in the program. A break in program is defined as a period of time when an Intern is working but is unable to go to school, or is neither attending classes nor working at the agency. The best interests of the student and the Department must be balanced in making these decisions. Therefore, a request for a break in the program must be sent to the USDA Pathways Programs Officer 45 days prior to the break in the program. A copy of the Student Trainee's Participation Agreement must be updated and filed in the Student Trainees' personnel file, if the request is approved.
- (32) It is the intent of the USDA Intern Program that the Student Trainees are either attending classes or working at the agency, or both, at all times while employed under the program. Upon approval of a break in the program, the Student Trainee should be placed on Leave Without Pay (LWOP), if he/she is not working. A NTE Student Trainee must not be placed on LWOP for longer than 30 days if on an approved break in program.
- (33) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may pay all or part of the Student Trainee's training expenses directly related to the employee's official duties. Student Trainees are eligible for tuition/academic degree training reimbursement (5 CFR 410.308). When the USDA Agencies and Staff Offices pay a Student Trainee's tuition and related college expenses, the Student Trainee must sign an agreement to commit to work for a specified period as per the agreement.
- (34) For all Student Trainee appointments over 90 days, performance elements, standards and measures must be established and provided to the employee within 15 days of employment and must include standards and measures specific to developmental activities. Student Trainees must be on a performance plan for 90 days, before a rating of record may be given. (See USDA DR 4040-430, Performance Management). Supervisors shall establish performance standards and conduct performance evaluations in accordance with USDA DR 4040-430.

- (35) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may promote Student Trainees who meet the OPM qualification requirements for the position in accordance with 5 CFR 362.203(c). Student Trainees with or without a NTE date are eligible for a career ladder promotion upon conversion, as identified in the original vacancy announcement for the Student Trainee's internship position, upon meeting the USDA Pathways Program qualification standards and other eligibility requirements. The action to promote a NTE Student Trainee is processed as a conversion. Time-in-grade (TIG) restrictions apply only to competitive service positions; therefore, TIG does not apply to Student Trainee appointments. Student Trainees must meet specialized experience and/or the educational requirements of the grade as outlined in the OPM qualifications standards.
- (36) NTE Student Trainees are not eligible for Within-Grade Increases (WGIs).
- (37) Student Trainees without NTE dates appointed to a position lasting more than 1 year, will be automatically advanced to the next higher rate of their grade at the beginning of the first applicable pay period following completion of the required waiting period, provided their performance is satisfactory and they have not received an equivalent increase in pay during their waiting period.
- (38) Student Trainees appointed to Wage Grade positions regardless of type of appointment are entitled to WGIs. Student Trainees will be automatically advanced to the next higher rate of their grade at the beginning of the first applicable pay period following completion of the required waiting period, provided their performance in the position is satisfactory and they have not received an equivalent increase in pay during the waiting period.
- (39) Student Trainees may be detailed to other positions within the competitive service, although it is not recommended.
- (40) Student Trainees are covered by 5 CFR part 351, for purposes of Reduction-in-Force (RIF).
- (41) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices must terminate Student Trainees who are not converted at the end of the program period. The end of the program period occurs 120 days after completion of the designated academic course of study (unless the student trainee is converted) or upon expiration of the NTE internship appointment, whichever comes first.
- (42) Student Trainees who fail to maintain the eligibility requirements of the USDA Pathways Program must be terminated from the program.

- (43) Student Trainees are afforded the same retention rights as excepted service employees and maybe eligible for severance pay if involuntarily separated under 5 CFR part 550, subpart G.
- (44) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may terminate a Student Trainee for reasons related to misconduct, poor performance, suitability, or failure to meet the definition of a student. Agencies/Staff Offices are advised to consult their Employee Relations Branch prior to termination.
- (45) Student Trainees count against full-time equivalent (FTE) ceilings, pursuant to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-11, Section 85.
- (46) USDA periodically requires USDA Agencies and Staff Offices to report USDA Pathways Program Internship hires.
- (47) Upon successful completion of the internship and having met eligibility requirements, the participant can be converted to a permanent or term position with a full performance level higher than that which he/she competed for the internship position.

b. USDA Recent Graduates Program

- (1) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may recruit and appoint individuals who have recently graduated from qualifying institutions or programs such as community colleges, colleges and universities, trade schools, and career and technical education programs, under the USDA Recent Graduates Program. To be eligible for the USDA Recent Graduates Program, an individual must have completed within the last two years a qualifying associate's, bachelor's, master's, professional, doctorate, vocational or technical degree, or certificate from an accredited educational institution.

Veteran's preference applies in the arrangement of qualified applicants for all USDA Pathways Programs positions (5 CFR 302.101(a)). A veteran who due to military service obligations was precluded from applying as a Recent Graduate during any portion of the 2 year eligibility period shall have a full 2 year period of eligibility upon discharge from active duty. In no event may the individual's eligibility period be extended beyond 6 years from the date he/she completed the required academic course of study (5 CFR 362.302). USDA Agencies and Staff Offices must refer to the participants in the USDA Recent Graduates Program as "Recent Graduates" and place them in positions with progressively more responsible duties which provide career advancement opportunities. Non-citizens may be appointed to Recent Graduate positions under provisions identified in the USDA Pathways Handbook, Section 9.1c. Citizenship is however required prior to conversion to a competitive service appointment.

- (2) Recruitment planning for the Recent Graduate must be executed in accordance with the Pathways Programs public notice requirements. The Department's priorities of full utilization of hiring flexibilities and Cultural Transformation should be considered when filling positions in order to meet workforce diversity goals.
- (3) Agencies will publicly post all Recent Graduate opportunities in USAJOBS for a minimum of 5 business days and only hire individuals who meet eligibility requirements identified for Recent Graduates. The announcement must provide information on how to apply, position title, series and grade (career ladders have to be identified in the vacancy announcement), geographic location of the position, and provide a point of contact for those seeking more information on how to apply to Recent Graduate opportunities.
- (4) Outreach with local universities, state employment offices and disability and veterans services offices should also be completed.
- (5) Classification of the position is based on the occupational series for which the Recent Graduate is hired. The grade level is set according to criteria in the appropriate General Schedule or Federal Wage System classification standard.
- (6) Candidates must be evaluated using the OPM qualification standards for the occupation and grade level of the position being filled. Applicants must also meet eligibility requirements. USDA Agencies and Staff Offices must make appointments that adhere to the qualifications standard established by OPM for the occupational series to be filled. Appointments may be made to any position for which the individual is qualified. The duties of the position to which the individual is appointed should be related to the student's academic or career goals. Initial appointments to scientific and professional research positions may be made at the GS-11 level for which the classification and qualification criteria for research positions apply, if the candidate possesses a master's degree or equivalent graduate degree directly related to the position the agency is seeking to fill. If the candidate has a Ph.D. or equivalent doctoral degree, which is directly related to the position the agency is filling, the appointment may be made at the GS-12 level, provided that the recent graduate meets OPM's qualification standards for the position.
- (7) Agencies and Staff Offices must make appointments to the Recent Graduate Program pursuant to the USDA Pathways MOU using the schedule D excepted service appointing authority provided in 5 CFR 213.3402(b). Applicants will be evaluated and arranged in compliance with 5 CFR 302.304 excepted service appointments.
- (8) Recent Graduates are appointed to Tenure Group II for purposes of 5 CFR 351.502 and accorded the same retention rights as other excepted service employees.

Appointments are subject to all laws, regulations, and policies governing equal employment opportunity.

- (9) A Pathways Program Participant Agreement must be completed before the Recent Graduate's EOD and signed by the Recent Graduate. The agreement must provide a general description of the duties; evaluation procedures that will be used for the participant; requirements for continuation and successful completion of the program; work schedules; minimum eligibility requirements for noncompetitive conversion to term or permanent competitive service employment according to the requirements of the program, the length of appointment and termination date.
- (10) An intermittent schedule is prohibited under the USDA Recent Graduate Program. A Recent Graduate may work a full or part time schedule. Supervisors are responsible for establishing a work schedule for the participant. Supervisors and Recent Graduates should agree on a formally arranged schedule. Recent Graduates may or may not be eligible for Telework (See USDA DR 4080-811-002).
- (11) The duration of the Recent Graduate's appointment in the excepted service is the trial period. Prior Federal civilian service is credited toward the completion of the required trial period in the same manner as prescribed in 5 CFR 315.802.
- (12) Travel payments and reimbursements and lodging payments are subject to Agency/Mission Area regulations. Recent Graduates are eligible for relocation expenses upon initial appointment to the Recent Graduate Program. At the discretion of the Agency/Mission Area, Recent Graduates are eligible for a relocation allowance when assigned to a permanent position upon completion of their college work.
- (13) On-boarding requirements require responsible stewardship of resources and accountability for the strategic management of human resources, including the successful acclimation of new employees into the workplace (USDA DR 4720-001). To achieve this goal, a uniform framework for orienting new employees to the workplace has been established. Agencies and Staff Offices will ensure that each Recent Graduate receives on-boarding materials. It is the Agency/Staff Office's responsibility to ensure that each Recent Graduate receives orientation. The Agency's Employee Orientation Program provides information on employee benefits, ethics, conduct, etc. The Recent Graduate should be provided additional orientation in accordance with the participant agreement.
- (14) Individual Development Plans (IDPs) are required for all USDA Recent Graduates. The supervisor and Recent Graduate must meet annually to update the Recent Graduate's IDP – typically at the same time the Recent Graduate is placed on a performance plan – but can be adjusted as necessary throughout the year to address changing requirements and needs. IDPs must be established within 45 days of appointment and approved by his or her supervisor.

- (15) Recent Graduates must be assigned Mentors within 90 days of appointment. The Mentor should be someone from the appropriate level that is outside the Recent Graduate's chain of command.
- (16) Recent Graduates are eligible for federal health benefits in accordance with 5 CFR part 890 as described in the USDA Pathways Handbook. Recent Graduates are also eligible for annual and sick leave when in a pay status in accordance with 5 CFR part 630.
- (17) Recent Graduates must take at least 40 hours of formal interactive training per year that advances the goals and competencies outlined in each Recent Graduate's IDP. Mandatory annual training, such as information security and ethics training, does not count towards the 40-hour requirement.
- (18) Recent Graduates who satisfactorily complete the USDA Recent Graduates Program and meet all eligibility requirements for conversion as outlined in 5 CFR 362.305 may be non-competitively converted to a term or permanent appointment in the competitive service under 5 CFR 315.713(a). Recent Graduates converted to term appointments may later be non-competitively converted to a permanent competitive service position. The conversion cannot be to a position that has a career ladder, unless it was identified in the original vacancy announcement. Program requirements include: U.S. citizenship; successful completion of all the requirements of the USDA Recent Graduates Program; demonstrated successful job performance; compliance with the OPM qualification standard for the occupational series to be filled.
- (19) Recent Graduates converted to a full time position in the competitive service do not have to serve a probationary period and acquire competitive status immediately upon conversion. Time spent serving as a Recent Graduate counts toward career tenure when the individual is non-competitively converted to a permanent position in the competitive service upon completion of the program.
- (20) Agencies and Staff Offices may extend the 1 year program period for up to an additional 120 days to cover rare and unusual circumstances. A request for extension must be approved by the Agency Human Resources Director within 45 days of the request.
- (21) Recent Graduates may apply for and accept a new Recent Graduates appointment with another USDA Agency or Staff Office or another Federal agency, as long as the agency meets all the requirements for participation in the Pathways Program.
- (22) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may pay all or part of the Recent Graduate's training expenses directly related to the employee's official duties. Recent Graduates are eligible for tuition/academic degree training reimbursement (5 CFR

410.308). When the USDA Agencies and Staff Offices pay a Recent Graduate's tuition and related college expenses, the Recent Graduate must sign an agreement to commit to work for a specified period of time as per the agreement.

- (23) For all Recent Graduate appointments performance elements, standards and measures must be established and provided to the employee within 15 days of employment and must include standards and measures specific to developmental activities. Recent Graduates must be on a performance plan for 90 days, before a rating of record may be given. (See USDA DR 4040-430, Performance Management). Supervisors shall establish performance standards and conduct performance evaluations in accordance with USDA DR 4040-430.
- (24) Recent Graduates are eligible for a non-competitive career ladder promotion upon recommendation from supervisor, meeting qualification standards and other eligibility requirements, as appropriate, provided the career ladder was identified in the original vacancy announcement for the Recent Graduate position. Time-in-grade restrictions apply only to competitive service positions; therefore, time-in-grade does not apply to Recent Graduate appointments. However, one year of specialized experience at the next lower grade level applies.
- (25) Recent Graduates are eligible for within grade increases (WGI). WGIs apply only to GS employees occupying permanent positions. "Permanent position" is defined in 5 CFR 531.403 as a position filled by an employee whose appointment is not designated as temporary and does not have a definite time limitation of 1 year or less. "Permanent position" includes a position to which an employee is promoted on a temporary or term basis for at least 1 year. The term does not include a position filled by an employee whose appointment is limited to 1 year or less and subsequently extended so that the total time of the appointment exceeds 1 year.
- (26) In rare instances, Recent Graduates may be detailed to other positions within the competitive service. (See 5 CFR 300.301(c) and 5 U.S.C. 3341).
- (27) Recent Graduates are covered by 5 CFR part 351 for purposes of RIF. Recent Graduates are in excepted service Tenure Group II for purposes of 5 CFR 362.306.
- (28) The appointment of a Recent Graduate who is not converted to a career or career-conditional appointment automatically expires at the end of the program period, or upon expiration of the USDA Pathways Programs Officer's approved extension, if applicable. (See 5 CFR 362.303).
- (29) Recent Graduates may be terminated for reasons related to misconduct, poor performance, or suitability. Supervisors should contact their servicing Human Resources Management Office immediately for advice and assistance if performance or conduct problems occur with Recent Graduates. Whenever a Recent Graduate is discharged due to poor conduct or performance, officials must

prepare adequate documentation outlining the facts leading to discharge and all counseling efforts made prior to discharge.

- (30) Recent Graduates in the USDA Pathways Program count against full-time equivalent (FTE) ceilings, pursuant to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-11, Section 85.
- (31) USDA periodically requires USDA Agencies and Staff Offices to report USDA Pathways Programs hiring data.

c. USDA Presidential Management Fellows Program

- (1) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may appoint only individuals who meet requirements set out in 5 CFR 213.3402(c). Individuals who completed an advanced degree from a qualifying educational institution within the 2 years preceding the OPM Program announcement or who are scheduled to complete an advanced degree prior to the date that PMF finalists are announced are eligible to apply for the Program. An individual may apply for the PMF Program more than once as long as he/she meets the eligibility criteria. Non-citizens may be appointed to PMF positions under provisions identified in the USDA Pathways Handbook. Citizenship is however required prior to conversion to a competitive service appointment
- (2) All USDA PMFs are considered and selected from OPM's list of PMF finalists.
- (3) The Agency is responsible for classifying all PMF position descriptions. The grade level is set according to criteria in the appropriate General Schedule classification standard.
- (4) OPM will select PMF finalists based on an OPM evaluation of each candidate's experience and accomplishments as stated in his or her application and the results of a rigorous structured assessment process. The Agency is responsible for verifying qualifications and eligibility upon appointment.
- (5) Appointments are subject to all laws, regulations, and policies governing equal employment opportunity.
- (6) Appointments to the USDA PMF Program are made in accordance with the Schedule D excepted service appointing authority provided in 5 CFR 213.3402(c). Appointments are subject to all the requirements and conditions governing term, career, or career-conditional employment, including investigation to establish an appointee's qualifications and suitability.

- (7) PMFs are appointed for an initial period of 2 years. The first 2 years of a Fellow's appointment is a trial period. A PMF may be appointed at any time during the 12-month period beginning on the date OPM publishes the list of Fellows finalists.
- (8) PMF appointments may be made at the GS-09, GS-11, or GS-12 level or equivalent depending on the applicants' qualifications.
- (9) PMFs are appointed to Tenure Group II for purposes of 5 CFR 315.201 and afforded the same retention rights as other excepted service employees.
- (10) A USDA Pathways Programs Participant Agreement must be completed before the PMF's EOD and signed by the participant. The agreement must provide a general description of the duties; evaluation procedures that will be used for the participant; requirements for continuation and successful completion of the program; work schedules; minimum eligibility requirements for non-competitive conversion to term or permanent competitive service employment according to the requirements of the applicable Pathways Program; and the length of the appointment and termination date.
- (11) An intermittent schedule is prohibited for PMFs. A PMF may work a full-time or part-time schedule. Supervisors are responsible for establishing a work schedule for a PMF in accordance with 5 CFR 610.121. Supervisors and PMFs should agree on a formally arranged schedule.
- (12) PMFs may or may not be eligible for telework. (See [USDA DR 4080-811-002](#))
- (13) The duration of the PMF's appointment in the excepted service is the trial period. Prior Federal civilian service is credited toward the completion of the required trial or probationary period, as prescribed in 5 CFR 315.802.
- (14) PMFs may be placed in a bargaining unit position and, if so, are included in the Local bargaining unit (BU). Orientations for PMFs identified as eligible bargaining unit employees will include any negotiated orientation requirements outlined in the applicable collective bargaining agreements.
- (15) Travel payments and reimbursements are authorized expenses related to mandatory training, such as travel and transportation between duty station and training location. PMFs are eligible for a relocation allowance. (See the Federal Travel Regulation (FTR), 41 CFR parts 300-304, 5 U.S.C. 5723, and DR 2300-002. <http://www.ocio.usda.gov/document/departamental-regulation-2300-002>)
- (16) On-boarding requirements require responsible stewardship of resources and accountability for the strategic management of human resources, including the

successful acclimation of new employees into the workplace. To achieve this goal, USDA has established a uniform framework for orienting new employees to the workplace. (See USDA [DR 4720-001](#)).

- (17) OPM will provide an orientation program for each class or cohort of Fellows and will provide information on available training opportunities. Each Agency/Staff Office must ensure that each PMF receives orientation. The PMF should be provided additional orientation in accordance with the service agreement.
- (18) Each Agency/Staff Office must ensure within 45 days of appointment, that each PMF has an IDP that is approved by his or her supervisor; and provide at least 80 hours of formal interactive training per year that advances the goals and competencies outlined in each PMF's IDP. Mandatory annual training, such as information security and ethics training, does not count towards the 80-hour requirement.
- (19) Mentors must be assigned to the PMF within 90 days of appointment. The Mentor should be someone from the appropriate level that is outside the PMF's chain of command.
- (20) PMFs are eligible for federal health benefits in accordance with 5 CFR part 890 and described in the USDA Pathways Handbook. PMFs are eligible for annual and sick leave when in a pay status in accordance with 5 CFR part 630.
- (21) Promotions are made in accordance with 5 CFR 362.405(c) and the USDA Pathways Programs Handbook. PMFs are eligible for within-grade pay increases when they perform at the successful level and serve the required waiting period. The waiting periods are the same as for permanent employees.
- (22) Supervisors must provide each PMF a minimum of 80 hours of interactive training per year, for 2 years, that addresses the competencies outlined in the IDP. Supervisors must provide each PMF with at least one rotational or developmental assignment with full-time management and/or technical responsibilities consistent with the PMF's IDP and the following requirements:
 - (a) Each PMF must receive at least one developmental assignment of 4 to 6 months in duration, with management and/or technical responsibilities consistent with the PMF's IDP. However, as an alternative, a PMF may choose to participate in an agency-wide initiative or other Presidential or Administration initiative that will provide the PMF with the experience that would have gained through the 4-to-6-month developmental assignment.
 - (b) The developmental assignment may be within the PMF's organization, in another component of the agency, or in another Federal agency.

- (c) In addition, the PMF may receive other short-term rotational assignments of 1 to 6 months in duration, at the appointing agency's discretion.
 - (d) Upon the request of OPM, USDA Agencies and Staff Offices must make PMFs available to assist in the assessment process for subsequent PMF classes. This may require travel on the part of the PMF to be paid for by the appointing Agency or Staff Office.
 - (e) Supervisors must ensure that an annual IDP is completed by the PMF.
 - (f) PMFs must complete 160 hours of mandatory Training, 80 hours of training per year for 2 years. The required courses will be taken in AgLearn. Completion of the required 160 hours of training is a prerequisite for conversion to a career or career-conditional appointment. Virtual University maintains oversight of all training and professional development for USDA Pathways participants. USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may require PMFs to take additional training. However, the additional training must not interfere with the required 160 hours of training outlined in the USDA Pathways Programs Training Plan. USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may use their training authority in 5 U.S.C. Chapter 41 and 5 CFR part 410 to pay all or part of the PMFs training expenses.
- (23) Prior to conversion the following certification requirements must be met: the appointing Agency's/Staff Office's Executive Resources Board (ERB) must evaluate each PMF and determine whether it can certify in writing that participant has met all of the requirements of the program, including the performance and developmental expectations set forth in the individual's performance plan and IDP. The ERB may consult the PMF's mentor in reaching its determination. The ERB must notify the PMF of its decision regarding certification of successful completion. ERB certifications must be forwarded to OPM. If the ERB decides not to certify a PMF, the Fellow may request reconsideration of that determination by the Director. Such reconsideration must be requested in writing, with appropriate documentation and justification, within 15 calendar days of the date of the agency's decision. The Director's decision on reconsideration is not subject to appeal.
- (24) A PMF who is a U.S. citizen may be non-competitively converted from the PMF Program to a term or permanent position in the competitive service when the PMF has: Successfully completed all the requirements of the USDA PMF Program; demonstrated successful job performance consistent with the applicable performance appraisal program established under the agency's approved performance appraisal system that results in a rating of record (or summary rating) of at least Fully Successful or equivalent and a recommendation for conversion by the first-level supervisor; and met the OPM qualification standard for the competitive service position to which the PMF will be converted.

- (25) A PMF must complete the USDA PMF Program within 2 years or up to an additional 120 days on an approved extension by the USDA Pathways Programs Officer.
- (26) As provided in 5 CFR 315.713(a), USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may convert, without a break in service, an ERB certified PMF to a term or permanent appointment in the competitive service. PMFs who are non-competitively converted to a competitive service term appointment may be subsequently converted non-competitively to a permanent competitive service position. Non-competitive conversion may be to a position within the same agency or any other agency within the Federal Government. The provisions of the career transition assistance programs in 5 CFR part 330, Subparts B, F, and G do not apply to conversions made under this part. A PMF's appointment expires at the end of his or her 2-year initial appointment. Although PMFs are eligible for non-competitive conversion to the competitive service upon successful completion of their program requirements and any other applicable conversion requirements. Service in the USDA PMF Program confers no right to further employment in either the competitive or excepted service.
- (27) A PMF converted to a full-time career or career-conditional position in the competitive service under this section does not have to serve a probationary period and acquires competitive status immediately upon conversion.
- (28) Time spent serving as a PMF counts towards career tenure when the PMF is non-competitively converted to a permanent position in the competitive service upon completion of the program.
- (29) A PMF whose appointment is converted, becomes a career-conditional employee when he/she completes the service requirements for career tenure or is excepted from it by 5 CFR 315.201(c).
- (30) A PMF appointment may be extended up to 120 days to cover rare and unusual circumstances or situations. Extension requests for PMFs must be sent to the ERB, within 45-days of the request using the USDA Pathways Programs Extension Request Form (See 5 CFR 362.404).
- (31) PMFs may apply for and accept a new PMF appointment with another Federal agency or USDA Agency or Staff Office, as long as the agency meets all the requirements for participation in the USDA PMF Program. (See 5 CFR 362.304 Movement between agencies). To move to the new agency, the PMF must separate from the current employing agency. The new employing agency must appoint the PMF without a break in service.

- (32) Time served under the previous agency's PMF Program is credited toward the 2-year requirement for non-competitive conversion eligibility to the competitive service. Because there is no break in service, the PMF does not begin a new period in the program upon moving to the new agency.
- (33) PMFs may be eligible to participate in USDA's Student Loan Repayment Program in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 5379 and 5 CFR part 537, Repayment of Student Loans. The repayments may be all or part of any outstanding federally insured student loan or loans previously taken out by the PMF who has been appointed to an internship or to retain a PMF. Student loan repayment is not an entitlement. Before any loan repayments may be made, PMF's must sign a written agreement to complete a specified period of employment in the Agency/Staff Office and to reimburse the Agency/Staff Office for loan repayment benefits if the PMF is separated involuntarily due to misconduct or failure to maintain an acceptable level of performance, leaves the Agency/Staff Office voluntarily or violates any other condition of the agreement.
- (34) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may pay all or part of the PMF's training expenses directly related to the PMF's official duties in accordance with 5 CFR part 410.
- (35) PMFs are eligible for tuition/academic degree training reimbursement (5 CFR 410.308). When USDA pays a PMF's tuition and related college expenses, such as in the agency's Multicultural Workforce Strategic Initiatives, the PMF will be required to sign an agreement to commit to work for a specified period of time as per the agreement.
- (36) Upon satisfactory completion of the PMF Program, the Agency/Staff Office may offer the PMF either a term, permanent career or a career-conditional appointment. If a PMF is unwilling to accept the offer of either a term, permanent career or a career-conditional appointment, the PMF shall be responsible for repayment of all tuition and related college expenses received as per the agreement. The payment agreed to under this section may not be required of a PMF who leaves the service of USDA to enter into the service of another agency in any branch of the Government, unless it is specified otherwise in the agreement. (5 U.S.C. 4108(b)).
- (37) For all PMF appointments performance elements, standards and measures must be established and provided to the employee within 15 days of employment, and must include standards and measures specific to developmental activities. PMFs must be on a performance plan for 90 days, before a rating of record may be given. (See USDA DR 4040-430, Performance Management). Supervisors shall establish performance standards and conduct performance evaluations in accordance with USDA DR 4040-430. The rating is to include an evaluation of the PMFs success in completing developmental activities designed to prepare the PMF to meet the developmental and performance expectations described in his or her performance

plan. In addition to the formal evaluation, the Agency/Staff Office is expected to provide regular feedback concerning the PMF's performance. If a PMF fails to meet expectations set forth in the performance plan with regard to his or her developmental progress or assignments, the Agency/Staff Office may take appropriate action.

- (38) PMFs are eligible for awards and recognition in compliance with the USDA Guide for Employee Recognition. (See USDA [DR 4040-451-1](#)).
- (39) PMFs are eligible for a non-competitive career ladder promotion upon recommendation from supervisor, meeting qualification standards and other eligibility requirements, as appropriate. Time-in-grade restrictions apply only to competitive service positions; therefore, time-in-grade does not apply to PMF appointments. However 1 year of specialized experience at the next lower grade level applies.
- (40) PMFs are eligible for Within-Grade Increases since their initial appointment is for a 2-year period. PMFs will be automatically advanced to the next higher rate of the grade at the beginning of the first applicable pay period following completion of the required waiting period, provided their performance in the position is satisfactory and they have not received an equivalent increase in pay during the waiting period. An employee's performance is satisfactory when he/she achieves or maintains a performance rating of satisfactory or better.
- (41) PMFs appointed to Wage Grade positions regardless of type of appointment, are entitled to within-grade increases. PMFs will be automatically advanced to the next higher rate of the grade at the beginning of the first applicable pay period following completion of the required waiting period, provided the performance in the position is satisfactory and the PMF has not received an equivalent increase in pay during the waiting period. A PMF's performance is satisfactory when he/she achieves or maintains a performance rating of satisfactory or better.
- (42) PMFs may be detailed to other positions within the competitive service (See 5 CFR 300.301(b) and 5 U.S.C. 3341).
- (43) PMFs are covered by 5 CFR part 351 for purposes of RIF. PMFs are in excepted service Tenure Group II for purposes of 5 CFR 362.306.
- (44) The appointment of a PMF who is not converted to a term, career or career-conditional appointment automatically expires at the end of the program period. USDA Agencies/Staff Offices must terminate PMFs who are not converted at the end of the 2-year program period unless an extension of no more than 120 days has been granted by the USDA Pathways Officer (See 5 CFR 362.303).

- (45) USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may terminate a PMF for reasons related to misconduct, poor performance, or suitability. Supervisors should contact their servicing Human Resources Management office immediately for advice and assistance if performance or conduct problems occur with PMFs. Whenever a PMF is discharged due to poor conduct or performance, USDA Officials must prepare adequate documentation outlining the facts leading to discharge and all counseling efforts made prior to discharge.
- (46) A PMF may withdraw from the USDA PMF Program at any time. Such withdrawal will be treated as a resignation from the Federal service; however, any obligations established upon admission and appointment (for example, as a result of accepting a recruitment incentive under 5 CFR part 575, Subpart A) still apply. If the withdrawal occurs within the first 6 months of the Fellow's appointment, USDA Agencies and Staff Offices may request reimbursement of one-quarter of the placement fee. USDA Agencies and Staff Offices must notify the Provost of the USDA Virtual University in writing, within 30 days of the withdrawal, when a PMF withdraws from the USDA PMF Program.
- (47) A PMF who resigns at any time prior to completion of the USDA PMF Program does not have reinstatement eligibility for competitive service positions based on his or her appointment as a PMF.
- (48) If a PMF withdraws from the USDA PMF Program for reasons that are related to misconduct, poor performance, or suitability, as determined by the USDA Agency/Staff Office, the PMF will not be readmitted to the USDA PMF Program at any time.
- (49) PMFs in the USDA PMF Program count against full-time equivalent (FTE) ceilings, pursuant to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-11, Section 85.

9. DEFINITIONS

Agency - USDA Agency or Staff Office

AgLearn-Learning Management System (LMS) - Software that automates the administration of training. The LMS allows for online submission and approval of training requests, tracks learners' completed training in a learning history, and provides reports to management. The Department's LMS is called AgLearn.

Break in the Program - A break in the Program is defined as a period of time when an Intern is working but is unable to go to school, or is neither attending classes nor working at the agency.

Individual Development Plan (IDP) - Individually tailored and described objectives and activities for an employee's career development.

Recent Graduate - An individual who recently graduated from a qualifying associate's, bachelor's, master's, professional, doctorate, vocational or technical degree or certificate from a qualifying educational institution, within the previous 2 years. A veteran, as defined in 5 U.S.C. 2108, who, due to a military service obligation, was precluded from applying to the Recent Graduates Program during any portion of the 2-year eligibility period, shall have a full 2-year period of eligibility upon his or her release or discharge from active duty. In no event, however, may the individual's eligibility period extend beyond 6 years from the date on which the individual completed the requirements of an academic course of study.

Specialized Experience - Experience that has equipped an applicant with the knowledge, skills, and ability to perform the job successfully.

Student - An individual accepted for enrollment or enrolled and seeking a degree (diploma, certificate, etc.) in a qualifying, accredited educational institution, on a full-or half-time basis (as defined by the institution in which the student is enrolled).

Tenure - After serving three years of *substantially continuous creditable service*, a career conditional employee becomes a career employee and gains career tenure. Employees with career tenure have permanent reinstatement eligibility and may be considered for positions without having to take another competitive civil service examination. Substantially continuous service means service without a break for more than 30 calendar days (i.e., the break must be for less than or equal to 30 calendar days).

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