



THE PRESIDENTIAL MANAGEMENT FELLOWS PROGRAM: FIRST IMPRESSIONS FROM THE CLASS OF 2011

This year marks the 35th anniversary of the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program, the federal government's premier initiative for recruiting and developing top talent from graduate schools across the country.

The two-year program's purpose is to "attract to the federal service outstanding men and women from a variety of academic disciplines at the graduate level who have a clear interest in, and commitment to, the leadership and management of public policies and programs."¹ Over the years, this program has groomed many distinguished public servants, including former NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon and Dan Tangherlini, the acting administrator of the General Services Administration.

The Partnership for Public Service, with assistance from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), launched a tracking study from Nov. 8 to Dec. 20, 2011, as the first phase in following the PMF class of 2011 through its two-year cycle. Our intent is to assess the program's strengths and weaknesses, and to shed light on changes needed to ensure that it remains a critical pathway to federal service for high-achieving individuals.

Our review of survey responses identified several key factors that may influence the quality of the initial experience for PMF participants. These encompass participant

characteristics, such as education, past work experience and expectations upon entering the program, and job satisfaction, which includes insights into fellows' early views of their agencies, their first supervisor, their initial work assignment and their orientation and onboarding.

Our data, which capture the views of 274 of the 420 fellows in the 2011 class during their first two to five months on the job, reveals some positive aspects of the program and some warning signals that deserve attention.

On the positive side, fellows' overall satisfaction with their work experiences in the initial stages of the PMF program achieved a score of 72.7 out of 100—eight points higher than the score for all employees government-wide captured in our *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*[®] rankings and analysis. The score is almost identical to that of new federal employees under the age of 30. We also found that fellows generally like and respect their immediate supervisors, have realistic expectations for the program and come with motivation to serve the public.

At the same time, the responses raised early warning flags. While the job satisfaction score paralleled that of young new employees in government, one might have expected it to be higher given the prestigious nature of the program and the qualifications and motivations of the PMF participants. But our analysis found that 35 percent of the fellows felt their first assignments were not always making good use of their talents and 39 percent did not believe that first posting served their developmental

¹ Executive Order 12008 – Presidential Management Intern Program, Aug. 25, 1977, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7993>

needs. In addition, 43 percent felt their supervisors did not fully understand how the PMF program works, and 40 percent said they did not get the guidance they needed in the early going from agency coordinators.

Although considerable time and effort goes into recruiting, hiring and training more than 400 fellows a year, the evidence suggests that many federal agencies and managers are not fulfilling some of the important needs of PMF participants during the first months of the two-year program. Unless remedied, these lapses could undermine the purpose of the PMF program and discourage participants from continuing careers in federal service.

The PMF program in brief

The Presidential Management Fellows program—originally called the Presidential Management Intern program—was established by a White House executive order in 1977 to attract outstanding graduate students to federal service who are particularly well matched to future management and leadership roles. Fellows go through a competitive, multi-stage screening process to be selected. Those selected must be hired by an agency within a year in order to activate their fellowships.

Among its selling points, the two-year fellowship promises successful candidates full-time salary and benefits, a mandatory four to six month developmental assignment with optional rotations of one to six months in duration, challenging work, and opportunities to network with agency executives and other future leaders. Although not guaranteed, fellows who excel in the program may also be converted to full-time positions upon completion of their fellowships.

Characteristics of the 2011 class

Beyond knowing that all incoming fellows are recent graduates of advanced degree programs, it is helpful to understand other characteristics of the survey respondents from the 2011 PMF class. In particular, a sizable majority of the fellows that we surveyed were not brand new to the workforce. Over 70 percent brought more than two years of prior work experience and about one-third had at least five years of experience. In addition, more than half (58 percent) had some prior experience working for the federal government—often for less than a year—prior to entering the PMF program.

Fellows' job satisfaction scores

Given the goals of the PMF program, employee satisfaction and commitment can be a useful gauge of what's working and what isn't, even in the early stages of a fellow's tenure.

Each year, the Partnership for Public Service releases the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*²

Fellows' first impression of initial work assignment

Was well matched with their skills and experience	65%
Took their developmental needs into consideration	61%
Provided opportunities to enhance their leadership skills	50%

As part of the PMF program, fellows expect to:

Take initiative and be a "self-starter"	96%
Interact with other PMFs in the program	88%
Perform some administrative duties	84%
Receive technical skills training	82%
Prove oneself before getting higher-level assignments	81%
Receive leadership skills training	77%
See tangible results from their work	74%
Get exposure to agency leaders	73%
Complete a rotational assignment outside their agency	69%
Receive mentoring	62%

rankings, which provide an annual snapshot of agencies' year-over-year progress, along with benchmarks to peer organizations. More than 260 federal agencies and sub-components are scored and ranked, based on employee responses to select questions in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

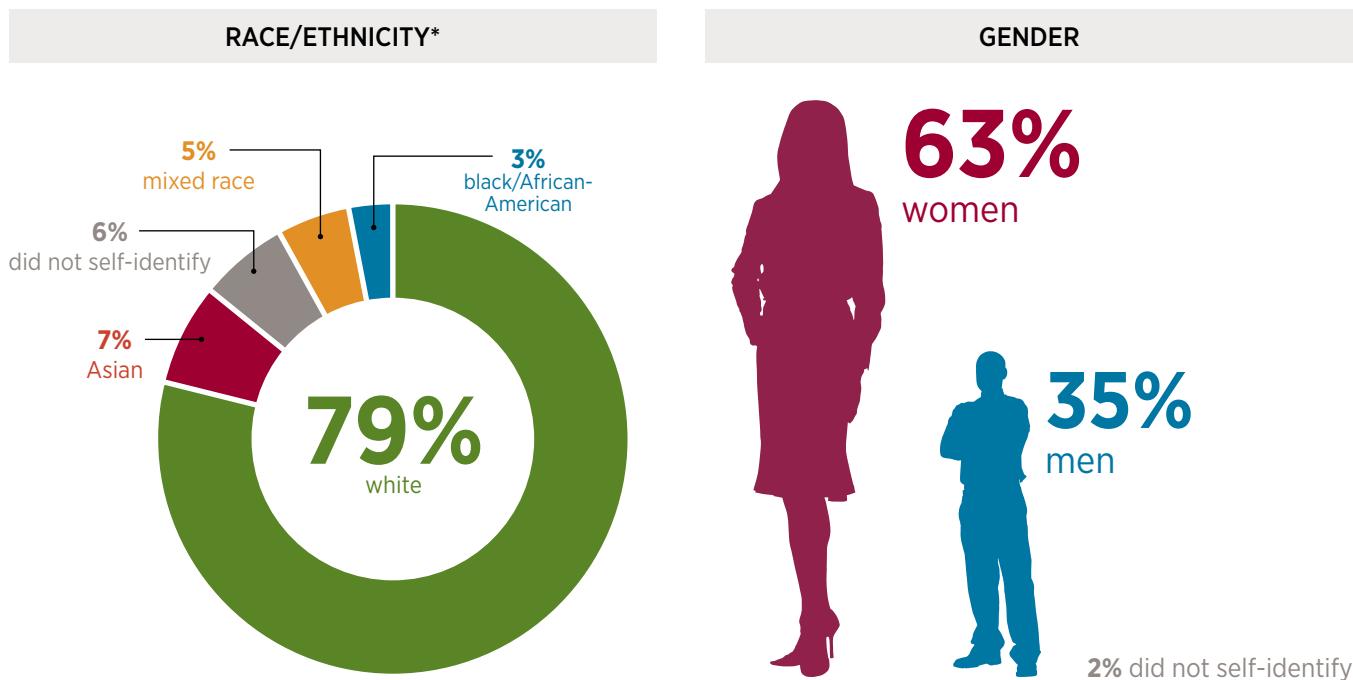
To establish baseline satisfaction scores for fellows at the start of their fellowship period, we included the three core *Best Places to Work* questions in our PMF survey which address satisfaction with one's job and organization, as well as willingness to recommend the organization as a good place to work.²

The overall *Best Places to Work* job satisfaction and commitment score for the fellows was 72.7. Although there is no perfect group against which to match the PMF fellows, the PMF score was almost identical to the score for all new federal employees under age 30 in 2011 (72.8), and is eight points higher than the score for all employees government-wide.³

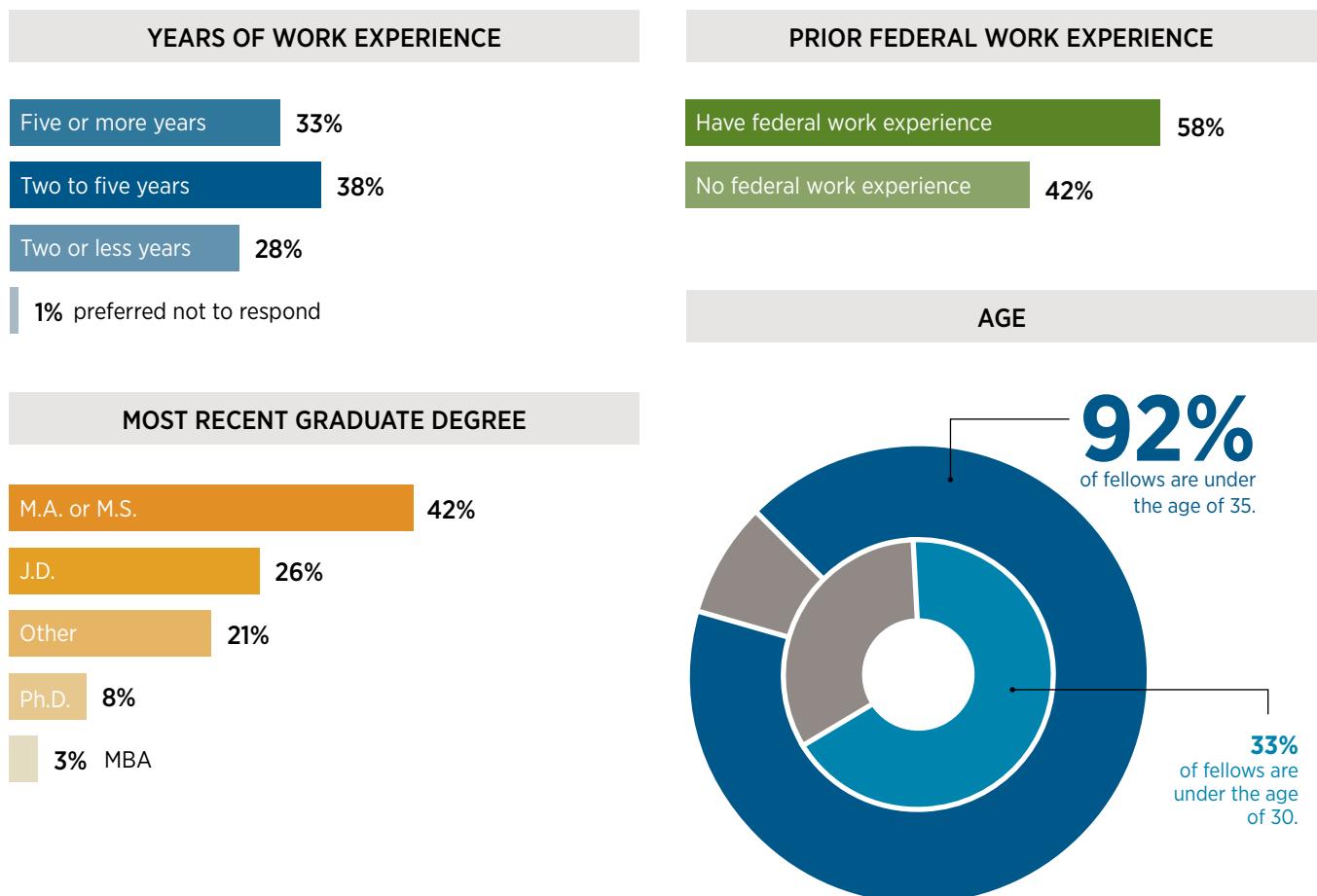
² The *Best Places to Work* index score is based on responses to the following questions from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey: "I recommend my organization as a good place to work"; "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?"; "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?"

³ Partnership for Public Service, "Best Places to Launch a Career in the Federal Government." <http://ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=165>

Demographic profile of the 2011 Presidential Management Fellow class



* Race and ethnicity are separate concepts in the U.S. Census



Key factors influencing workplace satisfaction

Although our study examined many possible issues that affect employee satisfaction, there were three factors that stood out as the most significant at this early stage in the PMF program: (1) a fellow's first work assignment; (2) the expectations for professional development and (3) how engaged supervisors are in the orientation and onboarding phase.

First work assignment

The single biggest factor in overall workplace satisfaction was how fellows perceive their initial work assignment. Positive perceptions were more likely when the assignment leveraged a fellow's current skills and also took their developmental needs into consideration. In other words, first work assignments that are well matched to fellows' needs can get the PMF experience heading in the right direction. Poor matches, by contrast, may do just the opposite.

About one in three fellows felt their developmental needs were not considered in making their first assignment or that the assignment did not match their skills and experience.

Expectations and motivations of incoming fellows

What do incoming fellows expect from the program? Expectations that align with workplace realities may affect outcomes for the better, while unrealistic or unrealized expectations may have the opposite effect.⁴

Managers who see these results may be surprised by fellows' strongest expectations in the survey—those related to taking initiative and pitching in on lower-level tasks. Nearly all fellows (96 percent) agreed that being a “self-starter” was important to benefit fully from the program. The great majority also expected administrative tasks to be part of their fellowship experience (84 percent) and said that getting higher-level assignments will depend on proving themselves first (81 percent).

Like many employees who are just starting their careers, newly-hired fellows placed emphasis on opportunities for professional development. Not only did fellows expect these opportunities to be part of their experience, but the stronger the expectation, the more satisfied fellows tended to be. The finding suggests that fellows' high expectations for training in leadership opportunities, mentoring and having impact through their work does not have to lead to disappointment. When those expectations are being met, fellows are more likely to feel satisfied with their new positions.

The survey found that 73 percent expect to benefit from professional development opportunities, including

Fellows' first impressions of their supervisors

Treats me with respect	89%
Values my contribution	87%
Has good technical skills	80%
Has good “people” skills	78%
Is available when I need him/her	73%
Communicates well	72%
Makes good use of my talents	61%
Understands how the PMF program works	57%

exposure to agency leaders, while 77 percent expect leadership skills training, 82 expect training on technical skills and 62 percent expect to have a mentor. In addition, many expect to interact with other fellows (88 percent) and to take a rotational assignment outside their agency (69 percent).

In terms of motives for entering the PMF program, more than 90 percent of fellows flagged the importance of professional learning and growth opportunities, intelligent and motivated colleagues and prospects for their work to help individuals and the nation. Similarly, roughly 80 percent agreed that opportunities for rapid promotion, job security, the chance to be creative and recognition for their work were additional motivators.

Of the many different motives and expectations fellows have for pursuing federal service, their expectations for professional development stood out as the second most important driver of satisfaction with their jobs and agencies.

Managers were more likely to provide leadership opportunities to employees whom they believed were developmentally ready. However, if these realities are not being clearly communicated to incoming fellows, it may inflate program expectations and lead to disappointment. The large gap between expectations and the actual experience for leadership development should be viewed cautiously at this early stage in the program and bears watching over time.

First impressions

Evidence suggests that first impressions including, but not limited to the first work assignment are important when an individual starts a new job.⁵ Our analysis found the third most important factor relating to job satisfac-

⁴ Merit Systems Protection Board, “Growing Leaders: The Presidential Management Intern Program,” <http://www.mspb.gov/netsearch/viewdocs.aspx?docnumber=253642&version=253929&application=ACROBAT>

⁵ Research conducted by the Aberdeen Group in 2006 found that 90 percent of employees decide whether or not they will stay at an organization or begin looking for a new job during their first six months of employment. LaShawn, Thompson, “On-boarding: Maximizing Productivity and Retention,” PM Boulevard (June 2007).

tion involved the quality of the early interactions that fellows had with their supervisors during the orientation and onboarding process.

The results showed that it matters when supervisors clarify fellows' roles and responsibilities, explain policies and procedures and help fellows write their individual development plans. At this early stage in a fellow's tenure, interacting with supervisors during onboarding had more impact on overall satisfaction than how fellows viewed their supervisors' professional abilities or personal qualities.

First supervisor

Research published by Gallup and others over the past two decades suggest that supervisors are essential to successfully retaining good employees and to improving organizational performance.⁶ In addition to their other skill sets, good supervisors build and maintain trusting relationships with their employees over time and provide regular and constructive support in areas related to performance management.

Although PMF supervisors came up short in their orientation and onboarding duties, fellows had largely positive first impressions of their supervisors' core abilities and personal qualities. For example, most fellows said their supervisors possess good technical skills (80 percent) and effective people skills (78 percent). The fellows overwhelmingly agreed that their supervisors respected them (89 percent) and valued their contributions (87 percent). Nearly three in four fellows also said that their supervisors communicated well (72 percent) and were available when needed (73 percent). Taken together, these numbers are highly encouraging.

At the same time, there were red flags in the data. Just 57 percent of fellows said that their supervisor "understands how the PMF program works," raising concerns about supervisors' preparation for their role in the program and the ability to follow through on program promises. These concerns were magnified by a second finding that only about six in 10 fellows agreed that their supervisor "makes good use of my talents."

Orientation, onboarding

Orientation and onboarding experiences provided mixed results for new fellows. Some basic aspects of the process earned high marks, including agreement by the fellows that they had been given an agency overview (78 percent) and had been introduced to workgroup colleagues (93 percent), agency PMF coordinators (76 percent) and organizational leaders (79 percent).

At the same time, the survey responses suggest that many aspects of PMF orientation and onboarding could be improved substantially. In fact, when asked for their

Fellows' first impressions of orientation and onboarding

Was introduced to ...	
... staff in my work group	93%
... leaders in my organization	79%
... PMF coordinator in my agency	76%
PMF coordinator is available and responsive to questions	64%
PMF coordinator is knowledgeable about the program as a whole	64%
Agency process and procedures were clearly explained	63%
Satisfied with information received at start of PMF program (overall)	62%
Was given guidance on creating an individual development plan	60%
Satisfied with PMF coordinator (overall)	58%
Supervisor provided clear direction about daily roles and responsibilities	53%
Was assigned a buddy (peer) to help get acclimated	53%
Found OPM's PMF orientation helpful in understanding the program	49%
Was assigned a mentor	43%

overall assessment of information they received at the start of the program, just 62 percent reported being satisfied.

The most critical players in improving orientation and onboarding may be fellows' supervisors. For example, only about half of surveyed fellows (53 percent) said that their supervisors gave clear direction on their roles and responsibilities, while less than two out of three said supervisors were clear on agency processes and procedures (63 percent) or guided them in creating their individual development plans (60 percent). PMF coordinators should also take note. Fewer than two out of three fellows agreed that their coordinators were responsive to questions (64 percent) or knowledgeable about the program (64 percent). As a result, just 58 percent said they were satisfied with their coordinators "overall."

The PMF orientation provided by OPM also received low marks, with less than half of fellows agreeing that it helped them to understand the program. A key reason seems to be the timing of OPM's orientation. A large number of write-in comments on the survey indicated that the value of the orientation would increase substantially if it were scheduled sooner after their start.

The survey found that just 43 percent of fellows said they were assigned a mentor. That number takes

6 "Gallup Management Journal"; Driving Engagement by Focusing on Strengths; Brian Brim, et al; Nov. 12, 2009

on significance when compared to the 62 percent who expected to receive mentoring. The substantial gap between expectations and what takes place appears to have been on the radar of PMF program administrators, and will be addressed by a new Pathways Program requirement that all fellows in the PMF program receive mentoring going forward.

In general, our analysis of the key drivers of fellows' early workplace satisfaction scores indicates that the actions of PMF supervisors during orientation and on-boarding play especially important roles. In particular, satisfaction is higher among fellows whose supervisors understood how the PMF program works and who actively engaged with fellows to guide them through the initial phases of the program.

Our analysis also revealed three additional factors that have smaller, and marginally significant effects on fellows' satisfaction. These are perceptions of their agency's PMF coordinator, the assignment of a mentor and "buddy" (peer) to help new fellows get acclimated and a motivation for public service, which includes the desire for one's work to help others and the nation.

The bottom line

While it is helpful to know what drives satisfaction, the real value is in knowing which issues are also actionable. The good news is that PMF program administrators, supervisors and other staff can take steps to remedy the issues the program participants identified. Our results suggest that the greatest impact on fellows' job satisfaction is likely to come from activities designed to:

- Place fellows in positions that are good fits for their experience and professional interests, and then ensure that their first assignments match their skills and developmental needs;
- Help fellows set appropriate expectations up front through realistic job previews of the opportunities available;
- Ensure that PMF supervisors are both knowledgeable about the program and engaged in the orienting/onboarding new fellows into their agencies;
- Support PMF program coordinators so that they are knowledgeable and effective in their roles;
- Give fellows the opportunity to establish a lasting relationship with a mentor that begins during the orientation session; and
- Nurture the strong public service motivation that almost all fellows possess when they enter the program.

The Presidential Management Fellows program is one of the major elements of the newly formulated Pathways program, which is designed to attract young talent to federal service to forestall the upcoming wave of retirements among senior agency staff. The results highlighted here suggest several distinct ways in which administrators can strengthen of the PMF program and improve its ability to meet the public's needs.

HOW WE GATHERED AND ANALYZED THE DATA

The Partnership for Public Service surveyed the cohort of 2011 Presidential Management Fellows using a web-based survey instrument. Respondents were contacted via email. Data was collected between Nov. 8 and Dec. 20, 2011. During that time, 274 fellows completed surveys for a response rate of 60 percent. Participation was entirely voluntary and confidentiality was assured. Independent variables used in the key driver analysis were constructed from the original PMF survey questions. These variables were combined with controls for demographic and personal characteristics in a multiple regression model of PMF participant satisfaction. Key drivers were defined as variables that were statistically significant at the 0.05 level, when controlling for all other factors.