



Payne Fellowship Prospective Applicant Handbook

Intended Audience: Prospective Fellows/Applicants

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SO YOU WANT TO BE A PAYNE FELLOW?

Dear Prospective Payne Fellows,

Thank you for your interest in applying for the [Donald M. Payne International Development Fellowship](#), named after the late Congressman Donald M. Payne, an avid champion of international development. The Payne Fellowship, which provides up to \$96,000 in benefits over two years for graduate school, internships, and professional development activities, is a unique pathway to the USAID Foreign Service.

First, we want to wish you good luck with the application process. The fact that you are opening this document shows your determination to successfully complete the application process of becoming a Payne Fellow. Many of us are on the other side cheering you on, as we all can remember how nervous, unsure, and excited we felt applying for the Fellowship. We also remember what it was like to have so many questions as we applied: What is the Foreign Service? What will my job look like? Where should I go to school for my graduate degree?

While we may not be able to answer all of your questions, the purpose of this handbook is to alleviate some anxiety with the application process and provide additional details on what you could be signing up for should you be awarded the Fellowship .

Many current Payne Fellows and Alumni receive questions regarding the application process, timeline and life as a Fellow. We hope this handbook serves as a great reference for you and prospective Fellows after you.

Please feel free to share this handbook (a living document) with other prospective applicants, as this is meant to be an open resource.

Sincerely,

Prathibha Juturu, '18 BS-40 Environment Officer
Mai Yer Xiong, '18 BS-02 Program Officer
Niesha Ford, '19 BS-50 Health Officer
Jessica Hernandez, '19 BS-02 Program Officer

APPLYING FOR THE FELLOWSHIP/SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

This section serves to provide tips and advice on how to best prepare your application for the Fellowship

Eligibility Requirements

Primarily, it is key to ensure your eligibility to apply for the Fellowship. This should be a simple box to check, as there are only three main requirements (Payne Website, 2021):

- You must be a U.S. citizen.
- You must be seeking admission to enter graduate school in the fall of the next year for a two-year program at a U.S. institution.
- You must have a cumulative grade point average of 3.2 or higher on a 4.0 scale at the time of application.

Note: the website notes that you must be seeking admission to enter graduate school. If you have a graduate degree already, you are eligible to apply, as long as you are willing to get a second graduate degree that aligns with USAID backstops. We will come to backstops and degrees later in the handbook.

The Personal Statement

The personal statement is your time to shine. This is your opportunity to hone in on your unique story and add value to your application. In 600 words or less, the goal is to describe why you would be a great Foreign Service Officer. From the website, the personal statement “*discusses the applicant’s reasons for applying, interest in foreign affairs, commitment to pursue a USAID Foreign Service career and any relevant experience or information*” (Payne Website, 2021).

Here are some initial steps we suggest, based on our experience, to get you started :

- Jot down any international experience you have and how that could have led you to this Fellowship;
- What initiated your interest in foreign affairs/international development?;
- What specific experiences, personally and/or professionally, led you to consider USAID’s Foreign Service?
- How will the specific graduate programs I’m looking at empower me to be a better USAID Foreign Service Officer?

It is important that your personal statement captivates and draws the reader in from the first sentence. The goal of the statement is to paint a picture of your experiences that led you to apply for the Payne Fellowship and want a career in USAID’s Foreign Service. You do not want your personal statement to be a narrative version of your resume. Show the reader you are qualified and dedicated through stories, do not just tell them. Before you start the personal statement, it would be a good idea to do some research on the Agency and the Foreign Service. Read through USAID’s website and take note of the Agency’s mission and technical areas of work. Additionally, the Fellowship office will provide all applicants with the contact information of the Development Diplomats in Residence (DDIR) to learn more about USAID’s Foreign Service.

These, oftentimes, retired Foreign Service Officers are happy to schedule calls with prospective Fellows interested in the Foreign Service. If you have not received their contact information yet, reach out to the Fellowship program manager or check the Payne Fellowship website under *Graduate Fellowship Program → Development Diplomats in Residence (DDIR)*.

Further, consider understanding the vision and mission of the Fellowship itself and try to incorporate that into your personal statement. Understanding the legacy of the late Donald M. Payne Sr. and his vision as a development champion may prove helpful in constructing your personal statement.

While you are ultimately applying to USAID, you are doing so through an academic Fellowship, so be sure to include (even briefly) a connection to your future graduate school studies.

The Financial Statement

Like the personal statement, this is unique to your story. In less words than the personal statement (400 or less), you have to explain your financial situation. Again, this can be written differently depending on your circumstances. However, this statement **must** include the following: (i) any financial assistance received during undergraduate studies, (ii) overall education-related debt, and (iii) ability/plans to pay for graduate school independently. This leaves little room for creativity like the personal statement, but nonetheless, the answers to these questions are uniquely yours. Make sure you answer them and do not leave them out in favor of other information you wish to give.

The Letters of Recommendation

Pay attention to **who** you are requesting a letter of recommendation from. According to the Payne website: *“One (letter) from a faculty member who is well acquainted with the individual and one (letter) from a community leader or other individual who can comment on the applicant’s non-academic accomplishments and his/her potential to serve as a USAID Foreign Service Officer”* (Payne Website, 2021). Therefore, one must be a professor at your undergraduate institution who can speak to your academic achievements (commonly, this is someone whose class you took) and the other can be flexible. However, just because your second recommender can be anyone, does not mean you should choose just anyone. Above all, you should make sure both recommenders you choose can speak to one or all of the qualities you’ve displayed that would make you a good Foreign Service Officer and that the committee is looking for, i.e. leadership, academic accomplishment, and teamwork.

Due to the nature of the recommendation, it might be helpful for you to prepare both of your recommenders. This can include, but is certainly not limited to, letting them read your personal statement, sending them your resume, sharing a one-pager about what the Foreign Service is and why you want to join, or doing a short 15-30 minute informal chat with them about why you are applying and what it means to you. Recommenders should have a good idea of what USAID and the Foreign Service is to be able to write the best recommendation.

Lastly, make sure they submit their letters on time! This may require some proactive monitoring and follow-up on your part, and it also means giving your recommenders sufficient time to write the letter. The Fellowship will contact them to submit their recommendation electronically, so you cannot request it and submit it for them. If their letter is late, then it could impact your application's ability to move forward.

Additional Documents

Other documents in the application include proof of citizenship, the student aid report (SAR), your official financial aid statement and official transcripts. These are straightforward unless you have special circumstances.

Request this information as soon as you can and make sure you follow the instructions on the application such as pdf vs word documents.

Exploring Masters Program Options

Depending on the deadline, your Masters Program deadline may be before or after the Payne Fellowship application deadline. Please be aware of these overlapping deadlines. If you have concerns that the masters program you are interested in may not align with a particular backstop, reach out to the Payne Fellowship Office, DDIRs', or Fellowship alumni as soon as possible. These individuals can help guide you or help connect you with someone who can help. We should note, you **do not** have to know the school you want to attend when you apply. It is more important you know the degree you want or are interested in. In addition, if you can link your interest area or program to your future role in USAID, the degree and school become a little less important. A few Backstops have a more narrow set of degrees that qualify for the Backstop. Please see the Backstop Job Descriptions on usajobs.gov. However, this does mean you should have a good grasp on how your intended backstop functions.

Refer to the Fellowship's list of [University Affiliates](#) for graduate programs that have offered to provide additional financial assistance to the tuition assistance and stipend that is awarded by the Payne Fellowship per year. Once you have been awarded the fellowship, the Payne Fellowship office will provide a list of the year's updated financial assistance agreements with each school. The universities recommend that you indicate you are applying for the Payne Fellowship in your graduate school application. Payne Fellows are not limited to attending these programs. Other programs may also give additional financial aid on a case-by-case basis. We recommend working with the Fellowship Director and graduate program to advocate to have your program added as an affiliate.

Pro-tip: Reach out to the Diversity Office or Diversity Dean at the institutions you are considering to ask about information about application fee waivers for Fellows, Fellow applicants, and graduates of minority serving institutions.

Other Application Tips

This should go without saying, but ensure that your submitted application is *free of grammatical errors*. This includes everything from your personal statement to your contact information. Ask a close friend or family member to proofread your application. Buy them a coffee for their efforts. If you are a student, utilize your honors, career, or professional center. Remember, career centers are there to help you, even if they are not familiar with the foreign service, they can check for spelling and grammar errors. In addition, having family, a close friend or the career center read your personal and financial statements makes sure you're showing your unique story and conveying what you want to say clearly. If someone who knows you cannot understand the story you want to tell, then someone who does not know you cannot either.

Go on the Payne website and check out the application tips there! We definitely want this handbook to be a resource for you, but it does not have to be your only one. This includes reaching out to alumni if you have questions or have more in depth concerns not answered in this handbook.

Lastly, make sure you submit everything on time. Put the deadline on your phone, on your bathroom mirror, or wherever you think would be most helpful for you to remember the deadline.

How to Prepare for the Finalist Process

This section provides tips and advice on how Alumni approached preparing for their interviews and writing portion once selected as a finalist

The Interview

Yay! You are one step closer to becoming a Payne Fellow. The 25-minute panel interview will give you an opportunity to demonstrate motivation, experience, skills, and knowledge relevant to the Payne Fellowship and a career in the Foreign Service of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Like any interview, it is always good to arrive prepared. Reread your personal statement and know why you want to join the foreign service. **DO NOT** regurgitate your personal statement. Expand on things you mentioned and be able to tell the story again. It can be helpful to practice talking to someone about why you want this and what you have to offer. The DDIR can be a great resource for this as well.

Formulate some questions for a mock interview so you can start to think through answers to questions that may come up. Review the vision and mission of the Fellowship again and connect it to your own story. To get you started, here are some questions an alumna's career service representative drafted for her:

- What does it mean to be a Foreign Service Officer to me?
- What are some major obstacles you have overcome and how have these prepared you for a career with USAID?
- Describe your ability to coordinate in a team. What role do you play? If possible, give an example.

Again, take advantage of school resources. Even if you graduated a while ago, this Fellowship is considered an honors/academic Fellowship, therefore, your honors and/or career office should be able to help you. If there are Fellows from your undergraduate institution, the school should also be able to connect you with them.

Lastly, do your own interview research. Glassdoor has questions from the traditional Foreign Service Officer application process that can be helpful to practice. The State Foreign Service Officer exam has online resources that can be helpful such as the [foreign service skills matrix](#) and core competencies. Remember to use the SMART method to answer questions (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and anchored within a Time Frame). It can be helpful to think of a couple of scenarios in which you dealt with conflict, displayed leadership, etc. and figure out how you'd answer using the SMART method. This can help you keep it in your repertoire if you need to use a previous experience you've had to answer or enhance an answer to an interview question.

The Group Exercise

The group exercise will test your ability to work collaboratively while solving a problem with limited resources in a set period of time. Don't overthink this part of the interview process as there is no best way to prepare for the group exercise since you are not given much information about this session beforehand. Come as you are.

The Writing Exercise

The one-hour writing exercise will allow you to demonstrate your ability to produce a concise, persuasive, and well-constructed essay on one of several topics related to international Affairs. It can be helpful to understand ongoing development challenges and connections to US national security goals. Sign up for the Washington Post and NY Times emails to keep up to date with what is happening globally. It is probably more important that you have a general idea of what is going on so you can write about it, not an intense reading on a specific topic. It's good to generally understand larger headlines across the world. The exception being if there's a region or particular situation currently occurring and repeatedly mentioned in the news. Those are articles or news to read in a little more depth. When in doubt, you should have a general knowledge and a more developed knowledge base.

The writing section is timed, so practice writing under timed conditions if you are not used to that.

So you're waitlisted?

Keep checking your inbox and don't lose hope! We've absolutely had waitlisted Fellows make it in the past! And if you're not selected as a Fellow, feel free to apply again. Refer to the section below.

So you weren't chosen [this time]?

The Payne Fellowship is incredibly competitive! We highly recommend you apply again in the next application cycle. Previous Fellows have deferred their graduate school acceptance by a year to apply again to the Payne Fellowship. Attending talks, panels and events in your local area to learn more about development and USAID initiatives can help you be a more competitive applicant.

Congratulations, you are a Payne Fellow!

This section is a brief explanation of the two placements you will complete once a Payne Fellow.

Congratulations on your acceptance of the Fellowship! You should be proud of yourself and your accomplishments. Get ready, the next two years will fly by.

Congressional Placement

During your congressional placement you will work in a members office, sometimes it is the congressional member of your hometown, but not always. In the office, you can be assigned an array of tasks ranging from attending committee meetings to writing talking points for your congress member. However, your congressional experience is what you make it. This the first of many times you will hear this but **advocate for yourself**. While you may have to help out with administrative work like answering phone calls and constituent letters (which can be a good learning experience), you need to orient your work on what you should know as a USAID employee. Ask to get on an international affairs portfolio, even if you're just shadowing and that includes appropriations (if your congress member is on the committee).

Remember, if you do not ask, people cannot know you are interested. You should ask for work if you are not assigned anything or find what you are doing less fulfilling. Demonstrate your willingness to help around the office and eagerness to learn. In general, congressional offices can be extremely busy. The time physically seeing and talking to the congress member can vary from almost never to often. Most offices will not hold your hand, which requires initiative on your part. Also, note that some staffers can be territorial over their work portfolio, especially if it's considered a coveted topic. Ask for coffee meetings with staffers both in and out of your office. This is a great networking opportunity, but make sure to balance that with your work level. In addition, you may have other Fellows in your office such as Rangel Fellows. This provides another good opportunity to network and further understand how the State department and USAID foreign service are different and similar.

During this time you are (typically) living at Howard University with other Payne Fellows, Rangel Fellows, and other students there over the summer and you will see other Fellows around

Capitol Hill. This is a good time to network! Go to networking activities, happy hours and sign up for talks! Build this into your experience there and establish that on your first day with your supervisor, if possible. Finally, eat lunch outside of your office, even if you sit alone.

Overseas Placement

One of the unique opportunities that Payne Fellows receive is their Overseas Placement, which takes place during the summer between your first and second year of your graduate studies. You will be placed in an Office in a Mission overseas for nine weeks. The purpose of the placement is to gain insight into USAID processes at Missions overseas. The Payne Fellowship Program coordinates with Missions to place you in an Office that is relevant to your Backstop of interest, whether that be specific to your technical Backstop (Health, Environment, Agriculture, etc.) or a more general Backstop (such as the Program Officer Backstop). Some of the benefits you will receive include funding for travel to and from the Mission, housing, a summer stipend, and a Mission mentor. Throughout the process you will report your progress to the Payne Fellowship Program to ensure you are on track to meeting your goals for the placement.

On top of having the opportunity to contribute to technical work at a Mission, you may also get a chance to work on unique initiatives, such as traveling to USAID project sites, planning for a congressional or presidential delegation visit, working with State Department colleagues on an Ambassador's visit to a USAID project site, traveling to attend conferences, working with other interagency colleagues, etc. Every Fellow's Overseas Placement experience is unique, but one of the biggest opportunities is being able to form relationships with other Foreign Service Officers at both USAID and the State Department and building your network early on. Many Fellows reach out to these networks for advice, mentorship, and during key moments in their careers, such as bidding for their next assignment.

After the Fellowship: Sneak Peak

This section is a brief explanation of what living and work abroad is like as a Foreign Service Officer (FSO) generally.

Living/Working Abroad

The foreign service is a lifestyle that can be very rewarding, but also challenging. A challenge to consider is that relocating every 2 to 4 years can be tough for you and/or your family. Ask yourself if you are up for rebuilding and redefining your community frequently for the next 10-20 years. If you are partnered (or hope to be), ask your partner if they are up for looking for new work every 2-4 years for the next 10-20 years. All of these things are possible to accommodate for, but are not always easy mentally, emotionally, or physically. You will miss birthdays, weddings, babies being born, and deaths in the family. While it is an incredible opportunity to work with USAID and live around the world, ensure that you understand the sacrifice it takes to live this lifestyle and be honest with yourself and your loved ones about what that might mean.

Before applying for the Fellowship and joining the Foreign Service, it would be helpful to get some experience working and living abroad to get a taste of the lifestyle that you will be signing up for. Additionally, you should read Foreign Service lifestyle blogs written by FSOs and their family members. It would be valuable to speak with current and/or retired FSOs to ask about their lifestyle, including housing options, unaccompanied tours, competitive bidding, working in an Embassy, school options for kids, and job opportunities for partners.

Once you are abroad, finding a hobby that you can actively pursue in your city of assignment can help you build community. You should take advantage of USAID's language program to facilitate your communication in the local community. You should read/learn about the country and culture. Additionally, you should take time to have coffee and/or lunch with your colleagues. Current FSOs have found it helpful to "manage up" to develop a productive working relationship with their supervisors and address career and/or professional goals. Additionally, it is important to prioritize your wellbeing and schedule self care (talking with family/friends, trips, spa visits, etc) and potentially seek out therapy or coaching (independent of USAID resources) to have a consistent, non-family, non-work-related, third-party to explore challenges, insights, and goals that emerge during your time abroad.

FAQ

Questions we often get as Fellows answered below!

Fellowship Questions

Who is eligible to apply? Who should apply?

- Anyone interested in joining the USAID Foreign Service and looking to get their master's degree can apply. This can be your second masters as well, as long as it is relevant to the backstop you choose. There is no age limit. If you are interested in foreign affairs, international development, or foreign policy; would like to learn another language or know another language; enjoy traveling; and can be adaptable when faced with challenges, then you should apply. Other specific people include USAID Program Assistants, USAID-funded partners/ NGO employees around the world, and alumni of prestigious international Fellowships.
- The Payne Fellowship is a unique pathway to join the Agency, with the aim of ensuring USAID's Foreign Service better represents the demographics of the US. If you're from an underrepresented minority group in the Foreign Service or among the first to go to college in your family or a community college transfer graduate and are interested in foreign affairs/development, you should apply for the Payne Fellowship!

Can you provide details on the Fellowship timeline?

The dates may be different depending on when the application deadline is, however an alumna's general timeline was as follows:

- Started application Mid Nov 2018

- Requested transcript and letters of rec beginning of December 2018
- Contacted DDIR for 20 min phone convo to understand foreign service, etc. beginning of December 2018
- Complete application sent in: Late December 2018
- Received finalist announcement Feb 2019 (~ 2months after deadline)
- Interview date: Feb 27th
- Notification of acceptance date: March 1st

Is the stipend provided by the Fellowship enough to cover all tuition, housing, food, and miscellaneous costs?

- Generally, no. If the Payne Fellowship has a partnership with your institution, then the stipend can possibly take you farther. If your institution has not already set up a partnership with the Fellowship, you can absolutely advocate for funding from your University. Fellows have described their situation, the unique opportunity the fellowship provides, and the need for funding support to their bursar's and received full tuition support after negotiations. Some Fellows decide to take out loans to cover additional costs as well. Other factors are whether you plan on working while in grad school, the cost of living where you'll be based and your particular lifestyle needs. Be mindful of your particular lifestyle needs, healthcare coverage, and budget for summers/breaks. Pursue teaching assistantships, research positions, and part-time student jobs if you're interested in additional financial support.

What do you learn during the Congressional Placement? How can I make the most of the experience?

- Network! Try to meet with each staffer in your office and try to understand how your Congress person's committees fit into broader United States Government priorities. Attend social events during your placement and ask other Fellows to post in a group chat if they hear anything. Go to webinars, talks, etc. Ask to sit in meetings when USAID is reporting to Congress on Capitol Hill. Not many foreign service officers get called to the Hill and know what that entails, so take good notes and really be in the moment. In addition, try to have a deliverable at the end of the placement that you can reference. Ask to contribute to a congressional delegation (CODEL), ask to write talking points or do research on a topic your congress member is interested in. Learn about topics related to our job as foreign service officers such as: how Congress sets the foreign assistance budget; how the USAID Office of Legislative and Public Affairs works with Congress; how Members set their foreign assistance agendas and talking points; how Congressional hearings work; how CODEL/STAFFDELS work and what they're interested in seeing.

Last but not least, have a positive attitude and prioritize your time-management.

What do you learn during the Overseas Placement? How can I make the most of the experience?

Your Overseas Placement is meant to provide you a taste of the FS life and for you to start building your network both at USAID and in the interagency. The Placement will widely vary among Fellows in your cohort. When you begin your placement, you will work with your supervisor to establish your workload, deliverables, and deadlines. You will also be assigned a Mission mentor who can help guide you and connect you with other colleagues, especially the local staff who will teach you about the projects. While some Fellows have the opportunity to provide significant technical knowledge to their Office, other Fellows will have opportunities to work on interagency initiatives, such as Ambassador site visits, congressional or presidential delegations, or respond to taskers or cables from Washington.

What does the transition process between Fellow to FSO look like?

The transition process varies. For some C3 classes it can be a very uncertain and bumpy ride. Information can come at different times and sometimes with quick turnarounds. Try to request and have as much information as you can ready in advance. For example, if you are a Peace Corps volunteer, request your proof of PC service as soon as you can. There is a separate handbook documenting this process in detail. You will get this handbook when you are a Payne Fellow.

USAID Questions

Can you provide details on USAID's role in the international development field?

It is worth noting that USAID is a major donor of foreign assistance, managing its development programs through implementing partners. (Note: Implementing partners are “non-governmental organizations contracted by Recipients to provide technical assistance, supplies and financial support as part of overall capacity development to strengthen the delivery of services.” (Law Insider)). As a donor, USAID has the ability to shape development and humanitarian agendas at the highest levels. You can refer to the [USAID website](#) for more details, which states that “USAID is the world's premier international development agency and a catalytic actor driving development results.” USAID's work advances U.S. national security and economic prosperity, demonstrates American generosity, and promotes a path to recipient self-reliance and resilience.”

What is day-to-day life like as an FSO?

Your overseas life as an FSO will vary depending on your Mission location and your role. Generally speaking, your job will entail various facets of project management, such as tracking data, managing budgets, and ensuring project goals are being met. You will also provide technical input to lead and guide projects. In addition, you will be coordinating with your Embassy and interagency colleagues, managing programs/activities, staying up to date with policy, working with your Washington colleagues, and reporting on project progress.

Outside of work, you will have ample opportunities to travel and explore the country and region you are posted in, learn different languages and cultures, and become friends with people from all over the world.

Where can I learn more about the different backstops?

The Payne Fellowship website provides some basic information on the types of USAID Backstops. It is recommended to look at [job descriptions](#) of each Backstop. You can find this information by googling each Backstop or by looking at the [ADS](#). It is important that your graduate studies align with your Backstop interests.

How much can I expect to be paid?

Foreign Service Officers are paid according to the FS Pay Scale. You can find this on the State Department website closer to when you are onboarded. The starting salary that each cohort of Payne Fellows received varied from year to year, and you will get more information about the salary setting process once you are a Payne Fellow. We encourage you to reach out to the previous Payne cohorts if you have specific questions.

What are the other benefits that you are entitled to as a FSO?

As Federal employees, you are entitled to all federal employee benefits, which include but are not limited to Thrift Savings Plan, Foreign Service Pension System, health insurance with the Foreign Service Benefit Plan, etc. In addition, while you are overseas, you and your family's housing is covered by the Mission.

Can I serve in the USAID Foreign Service if I identify as LGBTQI+?

Yes. There are current and retired FSOs who identify as LGBTQI+. When considering assignments, you can work with the Agency to ensure the countries you would potentially be posted in are friendly to the LGBTQI+ community. You will need to be proactive in advocating for a placement that fits your needs and personal situation. Your Backstop Coordinator and StaffCare can be good advocates for you.

Additionally, there is an employee resource group called "Gender & Sexual Minorities at USAID" that is dedicated to the recruitment, retention and promotion of diverse and talented LGBTQI+ staff. Employee Resource Groups, including GSM, are mandated to work on USAID policies around the respective groups (i.e. Gender and Sexual Minorities). We recommend reviewing USAID's [LGBTQI+ Vision for Action](#).