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## Tips for Preparing a Competitive Payne Fellowship Program Application

The Payne Fellowship Selection Panel judges each applicant based on a variety of different criteria. It seeks individuals who show clear interest in a Foreign Service career at USAID, along with a strong academic background, a commitment to service, leadership skills, financial need for graduate school, diverse interests in areas such as international affairs and development, cultural sensitivity, writing skills, and an ability to overcome obstacles. A good application introduces the individual to the panel and shows his/her unique motivations, experiences, accomplishments, and career goals. Thus, there is no specific formula for preparing a competitive application, as each applicant is unique. However, below are a few tips.

**1) Review all application requirements for the fellowship to ensure you are eligible and prepared.**

Applicants should review all requirements up front at the Payne Program website. *The program has no flexibility on core eligibility requirements such as U.S. citizenship, cumulative GPA, and plans to attend a two-year graduate program.* Applicants should make a plan to complete all aspects of the application on time. This will require steps such as securing letters of recommendation and transcripts, taking or securing results from the GRE/GMAT, preparing graduate school applications, collecting financial data, and writing a statement of interest. The FAQ section of the website can answer many application questions.

**2) Clearly explain in your statement of interest your motivations for applying for the fellowship and identify the background, experiences, skills, and motivation that you believe will make you successful in the USAID Foreign Service.**

This fellowship provides a unique pathway to a career in the Foreign Service of USAID. A strong interest to pursue such a career should be the main reason for you to apply. Thus, a first step should be to research the work of the USAID Foreign Service ([www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov)). If you are enthusiastic about promoting America's interests while improving lives in the developing world as a USAID Foreign Service Officer, then you should apply. Your statement of interest should highlight why you want to pursue this career and why you believe you will be successful.

Applicants should carefully craft a statement that highlights their motivations, as well as their background, experiences, and skills that would help them to succeed in the USAID Foreign Service. The panel is interested in seeing indications of diverse interests and backgrounds, including experience living, working or traveling overseas; international exposure within the United States; internship or work experiences in government, NGOs, service organizations, and/or business enterprises; and other experiences relevant to the work of the Foreign Service. It values experiences that show cultural sensitivity, including interest or experiences in languages or working with various cultural or socioeconomic groups. Competitive applications demonstrate strong writing skills, including clear



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statements of goals, interests and background, and proper English usage. The panel is interested in learning about any particular challenges, obstacles or disadvantages the applicant had to overcome and how this affected motivations or readiness for the Foreign Service. Competitive applicants demonstrate a commitment to service generally and a career in the Foreign Service of USAID particularly. Applicants do not need to explain to the panel their understanding of specific U.S. foreign policy or development issues in the statement; however, they should have a knowledge and understanding of fundamental U.S. foreign policy interests and goals, topical international development issues, and major foreign policy challenges facing the United States. These issues will be explored during the interview section of the selection process, if an individual is chosen as a finalist.

Applicants should review their statements carefully to ensure that they answer the question asked, that they express ideas clearly and concisely, and that they are free from grammatical, spelling or other errors. The statement should be 600 words or less. If your statement is too long, cut out non-essential information. The panel does not need you to tell them what globalization is; it needs to know who you are and why you want to pursue this opportunity and challenge.

3) **Demonstrate a strong academic background.**

Applicants should provide official transcripts for ALL colleges or universities that they have attended. Failure to submit all transcripts up front can slow consideration of an application. Applicants should request transcripts early and upload them in the Payne Program application before the deadline. The panel reviews all academic transcripts, looking for course work that would, overall, normally indicate particular academic ability and rigor or that is relevant to USAID Foreign Service skill needs. There is no specific requirement for an academic major, and the panel is interested in the applicant's overall academic background. However, it does look for coursework in the following areas: Mathematics /Quantitative Courses and/or Sciences; English; Economics, Business, and/or Political Science; and foreign language skill or studies. Coursework in these areas is not required but can be a useful indicator of success in graduate school and beyond.

4) **Obtain strong letters of recommendation; ensure they arrive on time.**

The fellowship requests two letters of recommendation, one from a faculty member and one from a community leader. The community leader should be an individual in a position of responsibility who can comment on the applicant's non-academic accomplishments and potential, including work ethic, initiative, dependability, composure, goal-orientation, inter-personal skills, etc. Examples of community leaders could include an internship supervisor, a faculty advisor for a student organization, or a work employer or supervisor.

Applicants should seek individuals who know them and their work well. Titles of recommenders are less important than the substance of recommendations. Thus, a professor with whom you've taken several classes will likely be able to give a more compelling assessment of your strengths and areas for improvement than the Department chairperson whom you do not know as well. Your supervisor in a congressional internship may give better insights on your abilities than a general recommendation from



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the Member of Congress with whom you did not work personally.

Applicants should approach recommenders early, provide them needed information, and monitor to ensure that they submit the recommendations on time. The best letters of recommendation directly address the applicants' suitability for this fellowship program and the USAID Foreign Service. Missing letters of recommendation are one of the most common problems in applications; it is the applicant's responsibility to make sure that all letters arrive on time.

### 5) **Demonstrate the need for financial assistance to attend graduate school.**

The selection panel factors economic status into the selection process. It is interested in learning of backgrounds that show financial disadvantage or applicants' needs to secure non-family economic assistance to attend graduate school. There are many different manifestations of financial need, including reliance on grants and loans as an undergraduate student, accumulation of significant student debt, the need to work while in school, lack of family resources, choice of schools, and/or discontinuation of family support for graduate school. Applicants can help the selection panel to understand their particular financial situation in the following ways:

- Answering financial questions in the application, based on the information in the FAFSA. Applicants should use 2015 financial data, if available. If not, the program will accept 2014 financial data.
- Submitting the Student Aid Report generated from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Again, applicants should use 2015 data if possible, but 2014 data is also acceptable.
- Submitting documentation from your university that shows financial assistance you received during your undergraduate years. If the applicant did not receive financial assistance, he/she does not have to submit this form.
- Writing a statement that explains your particular situation. The most useful statements focus specifically on questions of financial need. They clearly and concisely explain applicants' needs for financial assistance for graduate school and any plans for covering these costs. They use quantitative data whenever possible, including specific data on financial assistance received during undergraduate school and outstanding education-related debt. They can highlight overall family economic status, as well as the individual's situation, e.g. work during school or low-paid service positions. This is your chance to make your case. You have 400 words to do it.

### 6) **Include in your application all relevant extracurricular, community, or volunteer experiences and highlight any leadership roles in these efforts.**

The panel is particularly interested in extracurricular, community, or volunteer activities that show a commitment to service and to social causes, public policy, and related issues. Applicants should list all such activities and indicate any leadership roles that they have had in such activities, including creating programs or organizations or serving as an officer in an organization. The panel also values work experiences that show an interest in such issues.



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7) **List all relevant college or university honors and awards.**

Such honors and awards could include inclusion in the Dean's List, service or academic awards, scholarships, selection for prestigious programs, membership in academic or service organizations, or any other honor the individual would like to highlight in his/her academic or professional career.

8) **Proofread all aspects of your application carefully; submit all application materials on time.**

The fellowship selection process is very competitive. Applications that are polished, well written, address all requirements, and arrive on time and complete generally create a favorable impression. To ensure that all supplemental materials arrive on time, applicants should consider collecting and sending them together in one package and tracking the shipment.

9) **Contact the Payne Program staff if you have any questions after reviewing the website. We are happy to answer e-mail, talk by phone, or schedule an appointment.**