



United States Department of Agriculture
Marketing and Regulatory Programs
Agricultural Marketing Service
Livestock and Seed Program

QAD 200 Procedure
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Quality Assessment Division

STUDENT CAREER EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Procedure is to provide detailed information on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Livestock and Seed (LS) Program, Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) under which students can be hired as GS-4 Student Trainees (Meat Graders, Market Reporters, etc.). This Procedure outlines the recruitment procedures, qualification requirements, and training criteria of the program.

POLICY

The LS Program's mission is to provide timely, high-quality, and unbiased service that facilitates orderly marketing and distribution of agricultural commodities and fosters goodwill in the global marketplace. To advance this mission, the LS Program must recruit and maintain a highly-qualified, well-trained, and diverse workforce. One method of advancing this policy involves recruiting and hiring highly-qualified student trainees through the SCEP. The SCEP provides students with financial assistance and the opportunity to work and train as meat graders, market reporters, etc., prior to deciding on a career. It provides the LS Program with increased flexibility in hiring and training the best qualified personnel. To obtain maximum benefit from this program and to ensure more efficient and effective program operations, employees shall follow the provisions of this Instruction when recruiting, interviewing, mentoring, and training student trainees.

Student trainees are selected by officials of the AMS, LS Program from qualified applicants recommended by the educational institution. Selections are competitive and are made in accordance with USDA policy which states, "The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital or family status, political beliefs, parental status, or protected genetic information. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) "

**ALL LIVESTOCK AND SEED PROGRAM EMPLOYEES WILL COMPLY WITH
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND CIVIL RIGHTS GUIDELINES.**

BACKGROUND

The SCEP has been utilized by the Quality Assessment Division (QAD) for several years. Recently, the program was expanded to incorporate other Branches. The qualification standards have also been revised. Students pursuing baccalaureate or master's degrees in any field must meet minimum qualification requirements.

I. RECRUITMENT

All employees who have supervisory approval are encouraged to participate in the recruitment effort. **(Non-supervisory employees interested in participating in recruiting activities should contact their supervisor.)** To assist in this endeavor, the Administrative Office maintains a list of all educational institution contacts, slide presentations, video tapes, brochures, a tabletop display, etc. These materials are available for classroom presentations, job fairs, judging contests, industry shows, etc. To obtain recruiting materials, approved employees should contact the Training Officer at 720-497-2520. Responsibilities for recruiting are as follows:

- A. Division Chiefs, supervisory, and non-supervisory personnel shall:
 - 1. Attend for recruitment purposes:
 - a. Local cooperative education fairs, meetings, and functions at colleges and universities;
 - b. Regional and State cooperative educational functions.
 - 2. Recruit at judging contests, agricultural fairs, university seminars, career days, job fairs, etc.
- B. Recruitment Coordinator:
 - 1. Coordinates recruiting activities;
 - 2. Acts as the liaison between personnel and the LS Program.
- C. The Training Officer shall:
 - 1. Act as liaison between the students and the Branches;
 - 2. Act as liaison between the LS Program and the educational institution;
 - 3. Issue annual recruitment letters to targeted colleges and universities;

4. Send follow-up letters to students who attend recruiting events within two weeks after receiving the LS Program Registration List from recruiters; and
5. Receive all applications and keep applicants informed of their status.

D. Division Chiefs shall:

1. Coordinate recruiting efforts between their Branches and the Training Officer;
2. Select appropriate recruiters;
3. Review applications and report preliminary status of applications to the Training Officer within two weeks of receipt;
4. Ensure that applicants who pass the initial review are interviewed and report interview results to the Training Officer by March 1.

E. All employees who perform recruiting functions should:

1. Contact professors to arrange classroom presentations;
2. Communicate with appropriate officials (professors, USDA Liaison Officers, etc.) prior to attending recruiting events;
3. Send a letter of appreciation to the professor or appropriate official within two weeks after the recruiting event;
4. Submit a copy of the Livestock and Seed Program Recruiting Activity Report (**Exhibit A**) to the Administrative Officer and the Training Officer;
5. Immediately return the Livestock and Seed Program Registration List (**Exhibit B**) to the Training Officer.

II. INTERVIEWS

All students who pass the application review shall be interviewed in accordance with **AMS Directive 325.1**. (The Directive is included in the AMS Recruiter Training Manual.) If possible, interviews should be conducted in person. Every reasonable effort should be made to conduct all or part of personal interviews at the actual or similar jobsite. The applicant should be afforded the opportunity to observe the actual work to be performed, and should be informed of any unusual characteristics or demands of the job. Persons with disabilities should be allowed to determine if they can perform the job responsibilities. (More

information about conducting interviews with persons with disabilities is contained in the Recruiter Training Manual.)

The discussion portion of the interview should be conducted in the privacy of a quiet office. All applicants should be asked the same basic questions. The questions are identified in Livestock and Seed Program Interview Checklist (**Exhibit C**). After the interview, the interviewer should return the completed Livestock and Seed Interview Checklist, Livestock and Seed Program Student Career Experience Program Interview Report, and the Livestock and Seed Program Student Career Experience Program Interview Evaluation Report, **Exhibits C, D, and E** respectively, to the selecting official.

III. **STUDENT ELIGIBILITY**

To qualify for SCEP, students must:

- A. Be enrolled in a school's Cooperative Education Program and be recommended by an appropriate staff member;
- B. Attend an institution and pursue a bachelor's or master's degree (students must be enrolled in at least six credit hours);
- C. Be a U.S. citizen or Native of a territory that owes permanent allegiance to the United States prior to conversion to a career-conditional appointment;
- D. Be able to work in coolers (meat grading candidates only);
- E. Maintain at least a 2.0 overall average on a 4.0 scale, or the equivalent, and at least a C in courses in the major field of study;
- F. Not be a son or daughter of a USDA employee (Federal regulations allow for limited exceptions...eligibility will be determined by the Agency);
- G. Meet security requirements, and may be required to pass a medical examination that includes visual acuity and color differentiation (these expenses are reimbursable); and,
- H. Have successfully completed at least the sophomore academic year (60 semester hours).

IV. **SELECTION CRITERIA**

Selections will be based, but not limited to the following criteria:

- A. Demonstrated interest in and desire for a career as an LS Program employee;

- B. Participation in related extracurricular activities such as departmental clubs (Block and Bridle, Saddle and Sirloin, etc.);
- C. Semester hours (or the equivalent) in related course work, both completed at the time of application and scheduled prior to graduation;
- D. Academic standing in comparison to all other applicants;
- E. Recommendation(s) of appropriate college and university official(s);
- F. Prior work experience related to the livestock and seed industry;
- G. Recommendations of interviewer;
- H. Any self-imposed restrictions of the applicant, such as unwillingness to work in certain areas of the country, inability to relocate following graduation, unable to perform frequent travel, operate a motor vehicle, or travel by air.

V. APPOINTMENTS, EMPLOYMENT DATES, AND WORK SCHEDULES

Students may alternate between periods of full-time study and full-time work. To complete the program, students must complete at least 16 weeks of training prior to graduation. During periods of full-time work, students will be placed on a 40-hour-per-week work schedule. During periods of full-time study, students will be placed in a Leave Without Pay (LWOP) status while attending school.

Appointments as student trainees extend from the initial date of appointment to a date not to exceed 120 days after graduation unless the student is terminated. If graduation or the awarding of the degree is delayed more than 15 days after completion of academic requirements, the 15th day after completion of such requirements represents the beginning date for the 120-day period. The length of appointment for Graduate students must not exceed 30 months for master's degree candidates.

Student trainees will be appointed and scheduled for work periods which coincide, as nearly as possible, with academic semesters or quarters and summer breaks. Every attempt will be made to schedule a mutually satisfactory starting date for students on different academic schedules. Subsequent work periods will be scheduled in accordance with the individual's institutional cooperative education requirements.

NOTE: Only those students who have demonstrated the ability, desire, and dedication to become competent, career-oriented, LS Program employees will be afforded the opportunity to continue in subsequent work periods and be converted to a noncompetitive career-conditional appointment.

- A. An appointment may be terminated at any time for any of the following reasons:
1. Resignation;
 2. Suspension, expulsion, or withdrawal from school;
 3. Unsatisfactory work performance or failure to maintain academic standards;
 4. Physical unfitness for duty;
 5. Inability of the Agency to maintain employment of student for administrative reasons.

VI. APPLICATION PROCEDURES

Student trainee candidates must apply through their educational institution's cooperative education office or similar office. To apply, students must complete and submit an application packet to the address below:

Training Officer
USDA, AMS, LS, QAD
13952 Denver West Parkway
Suite 350
Lakewood, CO 80401

VII.

To obtain information or application packets, students should call or visit their college's cooperative education office or call 720-497-2520.

VIII. COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

- A. Pay - Students will be paid at the current rate authorized by Federal and Administrative action, and will receive any authorized payment for overtime. The rate of pay will depend upon the grade to which appointed and the locality where the employees work. When not in pay status, students will be placed on LWOP.

NOTE: In accordance with the Federal Employees' Pay Comparability Act of 1990, after conversion to a career-conditional appointment, students may receive reimbursement for certain travel and transportation costs associated with travel to their duty post.

- B. Tuition Reimbursement - Students who successfully complete the program, graduate, and contractually agree to work for the AMS, LS

Program after graduation may receive reimbursement for tuition, books, and incidental expenses that accumulate after the first work period. If authorized, students receive reimbursement after they become permanent employees. In return for reimbursement, students must agree to serve the Agency for a period equal to three times the length of training provided. If the student receives a Governmental award for educational expenses, the Government will reduce the reimbursement by the same amount to avoid payment duplication.

- C. Conversion - Within 120 days after completion of educational requirements, students are eligible for noncompetitive conversion to career-conditional appointment providing qualification requirements are satisfied.
- D. Leave - During work periods, students are entitled to earn annual and sick leave in accordance with Federal leave regulations. They are entitled to use earned leave on the same basis and subject to the same rules and regulations as other Federal employees.
- E. Holidays - Students will be paid for legal holidays which fall within the periods of work providing they meet the requirements under appropriate regulations for receiving such pay.
- F. Insurance - If a student's employment is scheduled to continue for more than one year and they are expected to be in pay status for at least one-third of the total time of their appointment, they are eligible to elect regular Federal life insurance unless they waive it. Also, if expected to be in pay status for at least one-third of the time of their appointment, students may elect health insurance and optional life insurance. Students who decline benefits will not be eligible to enroll until the next open season.

SPECIAL NOTE: Most students are not in pay status for at least one-third of their appointment. Students who elect benefits when they first start must pay premiums if they return to school and enter a LWOP status. To avoid this situation, students may wish to elect health and life insurance coverage after they are converted to a career-conditional appointment. Students who wish to enroll prior to conversion should call the Administrative Office and request the forms.

- G. Retirement - Students participate in the Federal Employees Retirement System and will be covered under Federal Insurance Compensation Act in accordance with applicable rules and regulations.

IX. TRAINING

During the first work period, students receive formal training in methods, procedures, standards, instructions, and/or specifications plus on-the-job training at a duty location. Market reporter trainees receive training at feedlots, livestock sales, and market news offices. Meat grading trainees receive on-the-job training in meatpacking plants and are tested on presented material. Tests may include written quizzes and examinations, as well as practical exercises and oral tests. All written quizzes and examinations must be taken independently. Tests will be scored and promptly discussed with each student. The results of the written test will be included in the student trainee's performance evaluation. To maintain the security of all written tests, students will not be allowed to retain copies of tests nor are copies of tests available for release to any institution.

If applicable, the second work period undergraduate and/or graduate student trainees receive formal refresher training and extensive on-the-job training at their duty locations. In cases where the educational instruction requires that students work three or more periods prior to graduation, arrangements will be made to schedule additional work periods for such students. This may involve scheduling two consecutive work periods, i.e., a second semester and summer break. All such cases will be negotiated with the academic institution on a case-by-case basis. Training responsibilities are as follows:

- A. Division Chiefs will attempt to place students in affordable locations. When possible, students will be located in pairs.
- B. Supervisors, graders, and reporters are encouraged to help students find suitable, affordable housing and provide other relocation assistance.
- C. Supervisors will:
 - 1. Either name or be a mentor for students;
 - 2. Be responsible for technical training;
 - 3. Within two weeks of completing training, send original copies of training document and recommendation form to the Training Officer and maintain copies in the office files;
 - 4. Relate work assignments to student's major areas of study;
 - 5. Orient students to the work setting, occupation, and requirements governing entry into the Federal service.

D. Mentors will:

1. Help students resolve technical and professional problems which might affect work performance, retention, and conversion to full-time employees;
2. Help the student adjust to the workforce, local environment, workforce culture; and find housing; and
3. If applicable, assist supervisor to rate employee.

E. The Training Officer will:

1. Assist applicable Branch personnel develop training plans and study materials;
2. Maintain training records provided by supervisors;
3. Advise Branches on training methods and materials.

X. PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

A. Each student trainee will be evaluated and numerically rated by their mentor or supervisor a minimum of three times.

1. Following the review, a conference shall be held with the student to:
 - a. Discuss the performance rating, get reactions, and learn of any factors that may have affected performance negatively;
 - b. Consider approaches to performance improvement in needed areas.
2. Determine the interest of the student in future employment with the Agency.
 - a. Indicate that official notice will be sent to the student and to the school regarding the student's acceptance for future work periods.
3. The numerical ratings shall be evaluations of the student trainee's academic knowledge, technical proficiency, and other factors, and will serve as official performance evaluations of the student trainee's progress. Other factors which might be evaluated are:
 - a. The degree of competence with which assigned tasks are performed;
 - b. Timeliness in completing tasks;

- c. The ability to accept and follow directions and adhere to established regulations in the performance of the job;
 - d. Demonstrated ability to win the respect and confidence of others in the performance of assigned tasks;
 - e. Demonstrated ability to assume a leadership role in assigned tasks;
 - f. Demonstrated physical fitness to perform the job adequately.
- 4. All evaluation and performance criteria will be explained to each selected student at the time of the appointment.
- 5. Failure to attain minimum ratings for the first work period, or for any subsequent rating during additional work periods, may be cause for separation of the student trainee.
- 6. The supervisor or mentor will provide original copies of performance evaluations and recommendations to the Training Officer and appropriate supervisors within two weeks of the end of each work period. Utilizing the performance evaluation the supervisor or mentor will recommend:
 - a. Retention of the student, whether a promotion is indicated, and what action is planned for strengthening performance or correcting deficiencies, or;
 - b. Termination.
- 7. Subsequent performance appraisals will be made toward the end of each period in accordance with procedures prescribed above. The final appraisal will include a conversion recommendation.
- 8. Students disqualified prior to completion of the program and those not recommended for conversion must be terminated, and may be reappointed only through competitive process.
- 9. The Training Officer will provide the applicable educational institution with copies of all performance evaluations within 2 weeks of receiving them from the supervisor or mentor.

XI. LOCATION OF STUDENT TRAINEES

- A. Worksites are located throughout the United States. Specific locations are identified in the applicable LS Program Preference Location Checklist. Checklists are included in the student's application packet.

- B. Students must pay expenses incurred in traveling to their training duty point(s).
- C. The Government may pay expenses incurred in reporting to the permanent duty point.

XII. SUPPLIES, EQUIPMENT, ETC.

- A. Upon completion of each work period or separation/resignation, students will relinquish to their supervisor or mentor:
 - 1. Accountable items including but not limited to equipment, certificates, and documents;
 - 2. Any keys to offices, lockers, and locks;
 - 3. Official USDA Identification;
 - 4. Keys and credit cards for Government-owned or licensed vehicles;
 - 5. Zippered binder, Meat Evaluation Handbook, and cooler coat;
 - 6. Unused advance of funds.
- B. The aforementioned will be reissued to student trainees at the beginning of subsequent work periods or conversion to a career-conditional appointment.

XIII. ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND EMPLOYMENT AFTER GRADUATION

Undergraduate and graduate students are hired as GS-4's and GS-5's respectively. Undergraduates who have completed three-fourths of the degree requirements and one work period as a GS-4 are promoted to GS-5's. Graduate students who have completed one work period as GS-5's are promoted to GS-7's. Following graduation, Bachelors of Science degree recipients can be converted to GS-5 Agricultural Commodity Graders (Meat) or Livestock Market News Reporters. However, candidates with a 2.95 GPA or higher on a 4.0 scale based on either the average of all completed college courses, or the average of all college courses completed during the last two years of the undergraduate curriculum are converted to the GS-7 level. Master's degree recipients can be converted to GS-9, providing they complete degree requirements within 30 months from the date of enrollment in graduate school.

After conversion to competitive status, employees may or may not be stationed at the same duty location(s) where they received training. Any reassignments at the LS Program's expense will be based primarily on the needs and workload considerations of the LS Program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.