

USDA 1890 Scholars Handbook



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Contents

Overview	2
Purpose	2
Definitions	2
Academic Requirements	3
Obligations	4
Financial Provisions	4
Room and Board	5
Tuition, Books and Fee	5
Computers	5
Housing and Transportation	5
Employment	6
Graduate School.....	9
Withdrawals and Terminations	9
Responsibilities	10
Code of Conduct	11
Did You Know?	12
Agency Coordinators	13
Liaison Officers Contact List	14

Overview

The National Scholars Program is a major effort of the United States Department of Agriculture and the eighteen 1890 Historically Black Land-Grant Institutions to award scholarships to students to attend one of the eighteen universities or colleges and study agriculture, food, or natural resource sciences.

Purpose

The purpose of the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program is:

- 1.To strengthen the long-term partnership between USDA and the 1890 Institutions;
- 2.To increase the number of students studying agriculture, food, and natural resource sciences;
- 3.To offer career opportunities to USDA/1890 National Scholars at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Definitions

1. **USDA** - the United States Department of Agriculture.
2. **1890 Institutions** - any of the 18 attending institutions.
3. **Scholar/student** - a student selected to participate in the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program.
4. **USDA Liaison Officer (LO)** - a USDA employee located on the campus of an 1890 institution, who coordinates the activities of the scholars from the university, and USDA's perspective, including, but not limited to, recruitment, counseling, and academic program development.
5. **Sponsoring Agency** - the USDA agency sponsoring the scholar in the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program.
6. **Service Agreement** - the document signed by the scholar, agency representative, and 1890 institution, outlining the requirements and specifics of the USDA.

7. **Mentor** - a senior colleague who can contribute positively to the student's academic and/or professional development.
8. **Work Site** - the student's official duty station or temporary work location.
9. **Work Experience** - the work assignment provided by the sponsoring agency, and that, which is related to the student's academic studies.
10. **Position Description (PD)** - the official USDA document that details specific duties and job responsibilities of an employee.
11. **Performance Standards** - the official USDA document for assessing the student's work performance.
12. **Individual Development Plan (IDP)** - a USDA document, which outlines requirements necessary for successful accomplishment of duties and responsibilities, and personal and professional development.
13. **Extended Leave** - extended absence from academic studies and/or work assignment, with prior approval.
14. **Noncompetitive Conversion** - the conversion of a student into the permanent work force.
15. **Termination** - the dismissal or separation of a student from participation in the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program.
16. **Resignation** - the voluntary act of separation from the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program.
17. **National Scholars Program Manager** - an individual who is responsible for directing, managing and providing guidance, oversight, and leadership to the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program.
18. **OPM** - Office of Personnel Management
19. **Agency Coordinator** - an agency employee who has been designated to coordinate all administrative activities for their respective scholar.

Academic Requirements

- Scholars must maintain a full-time course load (as specified by the institution. The sponsoring agency in concert with the institution may grant exception to

the full-time course load requirement due to extenuating circumstances beyond the control of the scholar.

- Scholars must maintain at least a 2.75 on a 4.0 scale cumulative GPA (or equivalent) for the first semester, and a minimum of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale cumulative GPA (or equivalent) for all subsequent semesters.
- The Liaison Officer will work with the student's academic advisor and USDA agency coordinator to ensure that the student maintains his/her eligibility by adhering to the grade point average requirement.

Note: The sponsoring agency and institution must approve change of major and or credit hours, prior to implementation.

Obligations

- Students must work for the sponsoring agency 1 (one) year for each year of financial support provided, unless otherwise agreed upon.
- Students are expected to report to their assigned work site during the summer period, unless other arrangements are made by the sponsoring agency.
- Students must complete a minimum of 640 hours of career-related work before completion of or concurrently with the course requirements, prior to conversion into the permanent workforce. Although students may earn 640 hours in one summer period, students are still expected to work each summer period unless other arrangements have been made with the sponsoring agency.

Note: Scholars desiring to change work site location must notify the agency coordinator.

Financial Provisions

The USDA/1890 National Scholars Program provides full tuition, fees (excluding graduation fees and personal items), books, and supplies (e.g., paper, pencils, calculators, printer cartridges, etc.), use of a personal computer and software, employment and employee benefits, and room and board each year to students pursuing a bachelor's degree at one of the eligible Institutions.

Note: Use of government funds for personal use is prohibited.

Room and Board

Each 1890 Institution shall provide room and board (inclusively) for each scholar while they are in the program.

Note: Scholars are required to live on campus during the 4 academic years that they are funded under this program, unless the attending institution makes other arrangements.

Tuition, Books and Fees

- The sponsoring agency shall provide full tuition, books, and fees (excluding graduation fees and personal items).
- Liaison Officers will submit to the sponsoring agency's coordinator a list of all costs incurred covered by the Scholars (e.g., tuition, fees, books, labs, conferences and workshops, etc.), each semester.

Note: Scholars should contact the USDA Liaison Officer regarding tuition, books, and fee issues and concerns.

Computers

- The Department of Agriculture will issue a personal computer (preloaded), printer and software to each scholar.
- Scholars should contact their sponsoring agency for additional software.
- Scholars should place his or her computer equipment with the Liaison Officer during extended periods of absence, to maintain security (unless other arrangements are made).
- Scholars should notify the Liaison Officer or designated technical support for problems associated with the computer and/or software.
- Scholars who withdraw or are terminated from the Scholars Program must return the computer, printer, and peripherals to the respective USDA Liaison Officer.

Note: Computers are for the use of the scholar only.

Housing and Transportation

- **Housing**

The sponsoring agency may, pay for lodging expenses for a scholar.

Note: USDA/1890 Liaison Officers shall assist agency coordinators with locating housing for scholars, when necessary.

- **Transportation**

The sponsoring agency may pay for transportation expenses (including expenses of transportation to and from the scholar's residence at or near the institution of higher education attended by the scholar and the official duty station at which the scholar is employed).

Agencies may pay for travel expenses related to training (e.g., national scholar's orientation, conferences, workshops, etc.).

Note: All Scholars must complete and submit a travel voucher (see your supervisor) upon returning from government travel.

Employment

- **Work site**

Work sites and assignments will be determined by the sponsoring agency.

Students are expected to report to their assigned work site during the summer period, unless other arrangements are made by the sponsoring agency.

Students desiring to change work site location must notify the agency coordinator. If a new work site is found to be in the best interest of the student and agency, the agency will facilitate the process

- **Work Experiences**

The sponsoring agency must provide work experiences related to the scholar's academic/ career goals.

It is expected that students accepted into the USDA /1890 National Scholars Program will at all times either be working at their sponsoring agency, enrolled in classes or both.

Note: The agency may use their discretion in either approving or denying a break in the program.

A student may work in USDA or a non-USDA work-related position during the school year. However, the scholar must maintain the required grade point average for this program.

Students must complete a minimum of 640 hours of career-related work before completion of or concurrently with the course requirements, prior to conversion into the permanent USDA workforce

- **Promotions**

Students are eligible for promotions during extended breaks based on work performance elements, experience and/or education.

Note: Scholars completing their freshmen year (30 credit hours or 45 quarter hours) are eligible for a GS-3 level, and a GS-4 thereafter.

- **Position Description and Performance Standards**

Graduating scholars with a 3.0 G.P.A. or better are eligible for a position that commensurate with their academic studies, at a GS-7 level.

Positions should be at two-grade intervals with promotion potential beyond the entry level.

The position description and performance standards are developed by the sponsoring agency.

Position descriptions are updated commensurate with promotions and reflect increased levels of responsibilities.

Performance standards are developed annually to reflect the student's position description.

Scholars are rated annually based on established performance standards.

- **Individual Development Plan (IDP)**

Scholars should have an IDP established by the supervisor in conjunction with the student and mentor.

The IDP should outline a course of career development for successful integration into the permanent work force.

- **Pay, Benefits, Leave, Extended Leave, Reduction in Force**

Scholars will receive pay in accordance with established pay schedules, during periods of work.

- students under this program - earn annual and sick leave;
- may select health and life insurance;
- are covered by the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS).

Note: Current transcripts will be required annually for promotions and upgrading.

A scholar, who needs extended time off due to health, personal situation, or other extenuating circumstances that are non-academic or non-disciplinary related, may be allowed to resume their studies anytime within a 12-month period.

Periods of extended leave cannot exceed 12 months of cumulative leave, without forfeiting the scholarship.

Requests for extended leave must be in writing with supporting documentation from a health official, parent, or other appropriate source.

Students in this program are in the excepted service tenure group II for purposes of a reduction-in-force, and are accorded the same rights as others in this group

- **Non-Competitive Conversion**

Students may be non-competitively converted into the permanent work force when they have:

- completed course requirements;
- completed at least 640 hours of career-related work;
- met qualification standards for the targeted position.

Students who have a 3.0 or above grade point average on a 4.0 scale should be converted at the GS-7 grade level, and into a two-grade interval position with promotion potential.

Students not meeting requirements or adhering to established guidelines governing the program should be terminated.

Graduate School

The USDA/1890 National Scholars Program presently does not have a graduate school program.

Scholars may attend graduate school with his/her sponsoring agency's approval.

Scholars approved to attend graduate school must be converted (full-time employee) and then placed in a leave without pay status while attending school.

Withdrawal and Termination

- **Withdrawal**

Scholars must submit a letter of resignation to their sponsoring agency coordinator informing them of their decision to withdraw from the Program.

- **Termination**

Scholars who fail to adhere to the terms of the signed Service Agreement may be terminated from the Program.

Scholars who do not maintain the required grade point average may be terminated from the Program.

Violation of the code of ethics and/or conduct (USDA and 1890 institutions) may be grounds for termination from the Program.

Responsibilities

- **USDA/1890 National Scholar is required to:**
 - provide addresses, telephone numbers, email address, etc., to mentors to ensure accessibility;
 - report changes in schedules;
 - maintain open lines of communication;
 - capitalize on spur-of-the-moment opportunities;
 - keep regularly scheduled meeting appointments;
 - inform USDA Liaison Officer and mentor of accomplishments and achievements in addition to the first signs of problems, issues, and concerns;
 - complete IDP and requested reports;
 - sign an "Employment Service Agreement";
 - report to assigned work site.

- **USDA/1890 Liaison Officer is required to:**
 - ensure that the scholar receives an academic mentor;
 - serve as a mentor and counselor;
 - receive, distributes, and secures computer equipment;
 - ensure the timely submission of paperwork for tuition and fees;
 - meet at least 3 times a semester with the scholars;
 - conduct an exit interview with scholars;
 - serve as USDA's representative on the Institution's campus to resolve all scholar -issue and concerns (e.g., grades, work assignments, change of major, transfers, etc.).

- **Agency Coordinators is required to:**
 - ensure scholars are paid the appropriate salary;
 - serve as an advisor on the agency's behalf;
 - ensure development of the Individual Development Plan;
 - ensure development of performance standards and elements;
 - ensure the necessary paperwork is prepared for payment of tuition and fees;
 - assure employment placement after graduation;
 - ensure the Service Agreement is signed and copies disseminated to all appropriate parties;
 - ensure each scholar is assigned a work site mentor.

- **Academic Mentor is required to:**

- provide guidance in understanding the relevance of courses to career development goals;
- provide guidance in developing good study habits provide guidance in time management to obtain a balance between academics and social interactions at the college level;
- serve as a liaison between a scholar and academicians when appropriate;
- require a written report on work experience.

- **Work Site Mentor is required to:**

- provide guidance for professional development;
- serve as a teacher by imparting various organizational skills;
- instruct the scholar in the power and political framework of the organization;
- provide tips on organizational culture, behavior, and social grace;
- attempt to build self-esteem and self improvement;
- promote and influences visibility of the scholar;
- ensure the scholar is taking the appropriate classes for his/her major;
- disseminate pertinent organizational information;
- assist with career planning and goal setting; preparing resumes; completing job application;
- sharpening interviewing skills; and developing the IDP;
- convene regular monthly meetings;
- provide office hours and travel schedules;
- assist with work site logistics.

CODE OF CONDUCT

Scholars shall adhere to the code of ethics and conduct as established by the attending Institution and the Department of Agriculture.

Did You Know?

1. Did you know, scholars are USDA employees of their sponsoring agency?
2. Did you know, agencies might pay for scholars to attend meetings, conferences, and workshops, as well as for lodging expenses, subsistence expenses, and transportation expenses?
3. Did you know, sponsoring agencies are required to hire their scholars upon graduation?
4. Did you know, scholars graduating with a grade point average of 3.0 or higher should be hired at a GS-7 grade level, placed in a two-grade interval position, and have promotion potential beyond the entry level?
5. Did you know, work assigned to scholars during the summer must be related to their major?
6. Did you know, all new scholars and their mentors are required to attend the annual scholars' orientation?
7. Did you know, there is no graduate school component to the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program?
8. Did you know, sponsoring agencies must give approval for a scholar to attend graduate and summer school?
9. Did you know, the sponsoring agency and the 1890 institution must approve change of major and academic credit hours before it is implemented?
10. Did you know, the Department of Agriculture no longer participates in the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Program?
11. Did you know, scholars must maintain a cumulative 3.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale while on scholarship?

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