



Improving Child Well-Being & Reducing Food Insecurity: An Action Plan for 2021

Academy Election 2020 Project
Working Group:
Foster Social Equity



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The Academy formed a series of Working Groups of its Fellows to address [Grand Challenges in Public Administration](#). These Groups were charged with producing one or more papers to advise the Administration in 2021 (whether reelected or newly elected) on the key near-time actions that should be taken to begin addressing Grand Challenges. This is a paper of the [Social Equity](#) Working Group. It includes these Fellows' recommendations for how the federal government can make food security in children a national priority. Another paper by the Social Equity Working Group includes recommendations on using the Evidence Act and the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act to advance social equity across the government.

***IMPROVING CHILD WELL-
BEING & REDUCING FOOD
INSECURITY: AN ACTION PLAN
FOR 2021***

A REPORT OF AN ACADEMY WORKING GROUP

**NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
ELECTION 2020 WORKING GROUP:
FOSTER SOCIAL EQUITY**

Working Group Members

Margaret C. Simms, Chair

RaJade M. Berry-James

Gary Glickman

Demetra Nightingale

STEPPING UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Food insecurity in children is a major challenge in the United States, especially during the current Covid-19 pandemic. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, “At the national level, the Household Pulse Survey data indicate that about 11.8 million children live in households that missed a mortgage or rent payment or sought a deferment, while roughly 3.9 million children are experiencing COVID-19 induced food shortages.”¹ Families living in urban centers, rural communities, and tribal areas face insurmountable challenges during our current national health crisis. Directing resources toward young children is a cost-effective way to improve life chances and is an effective strategy for promoting social equity.

This paper of the Social Equity Grand Challenge Working Group includes its five recommendations for congressional and executive action to support families in the United States who are in significant distress due to social and economic conditions:

- Establish a Cross-Agency Priority Goal on Child Well-Being;
- Increase Farm to School funding to \$15 million annually to improve the ratio of demand for grants to funding availability and create an accountability tracking system to measure progress toward a more equitable food system.
- Support all children in food-insecure families by giving high funding priority to ECE sites and tribal community projects.
- Increase the SNAP benefit by 15% to eligible households to help pay for food during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Establish a cross-site evaluation system that relies on standardized data and an assessment of activities and outputs contributing to the outcome of improving child well-being and reducing food insecurity.

¹ See U.S. Census Bureau (2020, June), for more information on measuring household experiences during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/06/the-risks-children-face-during-pandemic.html>

Food Security for Children as a National Priority

Directing resources toward young children is a cost-effective way to improve life chances and is an effective strategy for promoting social equity. Food security and adequate nutrition are key to a good start in life. A sound nutritional profile promotes many health benefits and facilitates lifelong learning. The Federal government, through the establishment of multiple programs in this area, recognizes its role in promoting food security. At the same time, some intentional adjustments will enhance the ability of these programs to promote social equity. The executive action agenda outlined here recommends using an existing cross-agency priority goal to improve child well-being through a Food Nutrition Service (FNS) initiative implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). To improve equitable outcomes in child well-being, we recommend that policy and funding shifts be made to early care and education (ECE) settings serving young children in preschool as well as early and aftercare programs. Also, we suggest a broader agenda to improve food security in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations are consistent with and respond to the general challenge for agencies to (1) address social, economic, environmental needs; (2) review policies, programs and practices that foster social equity as outlined in *12 Grand Challenges in Public Administration*²; and (3) promote social equity in the evidence-based policy environment³ in the presidential term beginning in 2021.

The Working Group's five recommendations for executive action support families in the United States who are in significant distress due to social and economic conditions. Families living in urban centers, rural communities, and tribal areas face insurmountable challenges during our current national health crisis. We support a USDA federal policy change that aligns with ECE providers to increase access to fruits and vegetables for young children living in food insecure households. The Working Group

² See National Academy of Public Administration. (2019), for more information on the *12 Grand Challenges in Public Administration*.

<https://www.napawash.org/grandchallenges>

³ See National Academy of Public Administration Election 2020 Academy Working Group, *Promoting Social Equity in the Evidence-based Policy Environment: An Action Plan for 2011*. https://www.napawash.org/uploads/Election_2020_Social_Equity.pdf

supports a national strategy to plan and implement agricultural literacy and nutrition education activities as a core community food strategy for urban and rural areas as well as tribal communities. In addition, we lend our support to the use of current Farm to School Program agreements to procure more fruits and vegetables through local distributors, farmers, and farmers' markets and encourage states to include ECE programs in the planning and implementation of Farm to School grant activity⁴. Likewise, we support USDA efforts to provide healthy and nutritious foods for children through the summer food service programs and encourage the expansion of meal delivery to include young children attending ECE settings, (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, programs in K-12 school districts.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cross-Agency Priority Goal to Improve Child Well-Being

The importance of addressing these aspects of child well-being is supported by a review of federal statistics. *Child Well-Being Key Considerations for Policymakers*, a report to Congress by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2017), summarized findings supporting a federal Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) goal on child well-being. Using federal data for children living in the U.S. that were collected by several agencies over 10 years, GAO examined multiple dimensions of child well-being in three critical areas of a child's life: (1) family, physical, and social environment; (2) physical and mental health; and (3) early care and education. To collect social and economic indicators which examine federal efforts to address child well-being across many policy areas, several federal agencies are involved (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U. S. Office of Management and Budget). GAO concluded that "child

⁴ See Center for Environmental Farming Systems at North Carolina State University for the North Carolina Farm to Early Care and Education food system initiatives.

<https://cefs.ncsu.edu/food-system-initiatives/nc-farm-to-early-care-and-education>

well-being has improved in some areas but not in others, and well-being continues to be generally worse for children who are minority, poor, and/or from families headed by single mothers (compared to married parents).” At-risk children living in the United States fared worse than others did and measurable gaps in child well-being have persisted over ten years.

Linked federal data on child well-being underscores how young children (age five and under) are at risk because of social and economic influences, measured across race/ethnicity, income levels, and family composition. In the current CAP analysis of child well-being, GAO points out that “food insecurity, or the inability of a family to provide adequate food for active, healthy members of the household, remains the same over ten years, with the exception peaking during the 2008 recession.” Obesity, cost, and quality of childcare, and enrollment in preschool also underscore equity concerns among at-risk children living in the United States (see Table 1: Child Well-being Indicators and Equity Concerns). By focusing on the early years of a child’s development, the cumulative impact of these measurable gaps can be reduced as food wealth is almost certainly connected to good health.

Following the examination of Child Well-Being federal data, GAO made the following recommendation for executive action concerning child well-being:

GAO recommends that OMB consider developing a goal that addresses a coordinated federal approach to child well-being among its next set of cross-agency priority, or CAP, goals, including working with relevant agencies to ensure their strategic plans include related goals and objectives. Enhancing the well-being of our children – one of the nation’s most valuable assets – requires a coordinated federal approach that takes into account the interrelatedness of federal actions and policies that aim to improve the lives of children.⁵

⁵ See U.S. Government Accountability Office (2017, November), *Child Well-Being: Key Considerations for Policymakers Including the Need for a Federal Cross-Agency Priority Goal*, for highlights on key social and economic indicators as well as recommendations for executive action on a coordinated federal approach to child well-being <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/688252.pdf>

Table 1: Summary of Child Well-being Indicators and Equity Concerns*

Key Indicators	Equity Concern
Food Insecurity	According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau Population Survey Food Security, <i>8% of households with food-insecure children remained the same over ten years. In 2016, Black, Hispanic, poorer, and/or female-headed households had the highest rates of food-insecure children.</i>
Obesity	According to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services National Survey of Children’s Health and data collected from the Children and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, Data Resource Center for Data Resource for Children and Adolescent Health: <i>Children with obesity often become adults with obesity, with increased risks for a wide variety of poor health outcomes including diabetes, stroke, heart disease, arthritis, and certain cancers. In 2016, children who were Black, Hispanic, or poor had the highest reported rates of obesity.</i>
Cost and Quality of Child Care	According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Survey of Early Care and Education household questionnaire and U.S. Department of Education’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Study and Birth Cohort, Longitudinal 9-month Kindergarten-Restricted-Use Data File: <i>In 2012, lowest-income households spent a higher proportion of their income on child care each month compared to all other households. Center-based childcare for children around age 4 was generally higher quality than home-based care for all households regardless of income levels, report 2005-06...</i>
<p data-bbox="161 1281 291 1338">Preschool Enrollment</p> <p data-bbox="123 1413 328 1503">*Source: GAO-18-41SP Child Well-Being</p>	According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, Curing Population Survey and the U.S. Department of Education Early Childhood Program Participation Survey (2001, 2005 and 2012): <i>From 2005 to 2015, the percentage of children ages 3 to 5 years old enrolled in preschool stayed about the same. Hispanic (in 2015) and poor/near-poor children (in 2012) had lower percentages of preschool enrollment than White and non-poor children, respectively.</i>

RECOMMENDATION #1: To address the Foster Social Equity Grand Challenge in Public Administration, the Working Group recommends that OMB establish a Cross-Agency Priority Goal in Child Well-Being grounded in an evidence-based approach to measuring trends in this area, including key indicators like food insecurity, obesity, cost and quality of health care, and preschool enrollment.

Fostering Social Equity in Farm-to-School Grant Programs

This Working Group recommends that USDA establish an agency priority goal that fosters equitable resources for America’s food insecure and vulnerable communities. This recommendation builds on the existing CAP strategy to implement a priority goal across federal agencies to build a stronger evidence base for enhancing national program outcomes related to child well-being. This recommendation to advance equity by prioritizing ECE in the Farm to School grant program supports policies and actions to improve the lives of all children, especially those who attend early childcare programs. This action could be part of a larger agenda to improve food security given the economic setbacks caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

Prioritizing Early Care and Education in Farm to School Grant Programs

Through school funding agencies, many states have instituted Farm to School grant programs to improve children’s health and school meals, improve access to healthy local foods, and implement educational agricultural opportunities such as school gardens, cooking lessons, and farm field trips. Over the past decade, our nation’s focus on early childhood nutrition has spread across several states by way of Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE) initiatives,⁶ supported in part by the W.K. Kellogg

⁶ See National Farm to School Network (2020) for more information about the Farm to Early Care and Education initiatives, <http://www.farmtoschool.org/our-work/early-care-and-education>

Foundation priority area, *Thriving Children*,⁷ organized by a working group within the National Farm to School Network, and implemented in several states. Farm to ECE statewide initiatives include a policy, system, and environment (PSE) change intervention to advance racial and social equity in the food system. Farm to ECE strategies “increase young children’s access to healthy, local foods in early care and education settings through local food purchasing and gardening; increase the quality of the ECE setting through food, nutrition, and agriculture-related experiential education; increase children’s acceptance and preference for healthy foods; increase children and family knowledge about healthy foods and local foods systems; and positively influence children, family, and provider healthy behaviors.”⁸ Farm to ECE activities embrace three key programmatic areas: (1) local procurement, (2) gardening and food, and (3) agriculture and nutrition education to teach young children where food comes from and how it grows, support children’s health and provide experiential learning opportunities.⁹ While USDA does a good job of supporting nutrition in school-aged children, grades Kindergarten through 12, it can better address food insecurity for everyone in the household by *prioritizing* resources for Early Child Care & Education settings.

Under the Farm to School Act of 2017, the USDA Office of Community Food Systems administers funding for several child nutrition programs to incorporate local, healthy foods into meal programs supported by the Farm to School Grant program. Program activities focus on local food purchasing, school gardens, and agricultural education. According to the 2015 USDA Farm to School Census, 42% of the 42,587 schools represented by 5,254 districts participated in farm to school activities to improve children’s access to local foods. In 2018, the National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey on Growing Healthy Futures for All Children asked 2,030 early care and education sites across 46 states about their Farm to ECE activities. Almost half of the respondents were

⁷ See W.K Kellogg Foundation grants in focus area, *Thrive Children*, <https://www.wkcf.org/grants#pp=10&p=1&f1=thriving-children>

⁸ See UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (2020) *SNAP-ED Toolkit for Farm to ECE*, <https://snapedtoolkit.org/interventions/programs/farm-to-early-care-and-education/>

⁹ See National Farm to School Network (2018) for the National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey, <http://www.farmtoschool.org/our-work/early-care-and-education>

incorporating core elements of Farm to ECE (e.g., local procurement, gardens, and food and agriculture education) into their childcare centers, slightly more than one-third of participating sites were serving more than 50% low-income children and one-third of participating sites have implemented farm to ECE programs for more than 5 years to advance the health and wellbeing of young children, engage families and communities and enhance the quality of the ECE setting.¹⁰ However, the share of funding going to these early care and education (ECE) centers is disproportionately very low.

In the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) area, the USDA administers the Farm to School Grant Program. Program funding increased significantly in FY 2019; however, a brief analysis of the list of awardees revealed that USDA supported 31 planning grants and 80 implementation programs for K through 12 schools. Of the 111 awardees receiving funding for planning or implementation, only 3 awardees (less than 5 percent) were earmarked for ECE centers.¹¹ In the FY 2020 school year, USDA reported that the Farm to School Grant program “supports 126 grants which served more than 5,400 schools and 3.2 million students, noting that nearly 64 percent of them were eligible for free or reduced-price meals.”¹² To anticipate the impact of the grant program and understand policy impact, key data describing program implementation must include (a) definition of local; (b) amount of money spent on local purchases; (c) most common products purchased locally; (e) the sources of local products; (f) benefits and challenges of participating in farm to school/ECE; (g) number and use of edible school gardens; and (h) the number of salad bars.¹³

¹⁰ See National Farm to School Network and Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (2018) survey results from 2,030 ECE sites, serving 255,257 young children in 46 states, <http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/ECESurvey18-Infographic.pdf>

¹¹ See U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (2019, July) for *FY 2019 Farm to School List of Awardees* by state and type of program, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/FY2019FarmtoSchoolAwardees.pdf>

¹² See U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (2019, October 22) *Community Foods System: Farm to School Grant Program*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/farm-school-grant-program>

¹³ See Facts About the Upcoming U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm to School Census (2019), <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/FactsAbouttheCensusFinal.pdf>

RECOMMENDATION #2: The Working Group recommends increasing Farm to School funding to \$15 million annually to improve the ratio of demand for grants to funding availability and create an accountability tracking system to measure progress toward a more equitable food system.

Prioritize Program Goals Directed Toward Improving the Lives of Children

The USDA provides a safety net for food-insecure families and, based on scientific evidence, promotes dietary guidance for school funding authorities. The food and nutrition goal of the USDA is to “increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education in a way that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.”¹⁴ While the FY 2020 Farm to School Census data has not been released, new study data reveals that school closings, bans on gathering, work from home requirements, closures at work, and other types of restrictions have exacerbated food insecurity in the United States. In the absence of school, the COVID Impact Study and in the Survey of Mothers with Young Children estimated that “more than one in five households in the U.S, and two in five households with mothers with children 12 and under, are going hungry due to the economic instability of the coronavirus epidemic.”¹⁵

¹⁴ See U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition for more information on child nutrition programs, <https://www.usda.gov/topics/food-and-nutrition>

¹⁵ See Hamilton Project (2020, May 6), *The COVID-19 crisis has already left too many children hungry in America: Recession Ready, Effective Government*, <https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/the-covid-19-crisis-has-already-left-too-many-children-hungry-in-america>

According to the Center for Disease and Prevention, “eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables can help protect against some serious and costly chronic diseases, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, and obesity.”¹⁶ While health outcomes and health behaviors are influenced by policies, systems, and the social determinants of health in a child’s environment, a federal policy that prioritizes funding for childcare centers will have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of vulnerable, food-insecure children. Several data briefs on the health and nutrition of children, adolescents, and their families justify a collaborative approach to improve policies, expand programs and sustain best practices that increase access to local, healthy foods for children in early care and education programs.

RECOMMENDATION #3: To address the Foster Social Equity Grand Challenge in Public Administration, the Working Group encourages our nation’s leaders to remain committed to poverty and inequality reduction policies by prioritizing program goals that leverage resources for children, age 5 and under. We recommend supporting all children in food-insecure families by giving high funding priority to ECE sites and tribal community projects. Currently, in areas where child well-being is worse, children who are minority, poor, or in families headed by single mothers are food-insecure, that is, they lack access to enough food for an active, healthy life. By *prioritizing funding* for Farm to School grants for early childcare programs, USDA ensures nutritional adequacy for all household children under possibly modified conditions post-COVID-19. Furthermore, this approach will improve Farm to School grant program participation of early care and education sites serving vulnerable and diverse children and their families by offering technical assistance and micro-grants for capacity building projects and programming among eligible grantees.

¹⁶ See Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Nutrition: State Indicator Report on Fruits and Vegetables. (2018). <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/data-statistics/2018-state-indicator-report-fruits-vegetables.html>

USDA Programs and Assessments

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) measures household food security and insecurity along a continuum from high food security to very low food security.¹⁷ The lack of access to adequate food or *food insecurity* is defined by the USDA (2019), “as a situation of limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way.”¹⁸ For some households, *food insecurity* occurs at a low food security level or a very low food security level. The USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) describes *Low Food Security* as when “households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.” Similarly, *Very Low Food Security* occurs “at times during the year when eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food” according to USDA ERS. Fundamentally, USDA acknowledges that food insecurity is “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.”

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, “Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”¹⁹ According to Feeding America²⁰, there are almost 13 million food-insecure children in the United States. It is estimated that 21% of children are likely *ineligible* for federal nutrition programs because their household income is above 185% of the poverty level. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child warns that “children who do not

¹⁷ See U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2012, September) U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8282/short2012.pdf>

¹⁸ See U.S. Department of Agriculture (2019, September 4) for definitions of food security, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>

¹⁹ See Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh (2017) *Household Food Security in the United States in 2016*, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84973/err-237.pdf?v=8107.4>

²⁰ See Feeding America (2019) for the impact of the pandemic on food insecure children in the U.S. and food insecurity rate, <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2017/child>

receive what they need for strong, healthy brain development during early childhood may never recover their lost potential for cognitive growth and eventual contributions to society.”²¹ In very young children, inadequate nutrition impairs cognitive development, so promoting proper nutrition advances social equity matters for many American children.²²

Our nation’s focus on food insecurity has been sidelined by the coronavirus pandemic. For people living in poverty, programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provide financial assistance for nutrition. Since the 2016 election, fewer people received food stamps and caseloads for TANF had fallen; however, greater reliance on government programs is predicted post-COVID largely due to unprecedented unemployment and economic inactivity. USDA Food and Nutrition Service program guidance in America’s response to COVID-19 has been swift, allowing households to make SNAP online purchases for food, use EBT cards for Pay at Pickup purchase, and making other necessary administrative changes. However, more can be done to promote equity in the food system given the rise in food insecurity resulting from COVID-19.

As our nation braces for the full impact of the coronavirus, we are reminded of the safety net that the SNAP program has historically provided families following a recession. In addition to helping families put food on their table, researchers at the Urban Institute affirm, “SNAP is an antipoverty program, a work support program, a promoter of health and nutrition, and an automatic stabilizer in recessions.” SNAP benefits reduce the rate of poverty, provide secondary health benefits to food-insecure families, and help families cope with financial hardships.”²³

²¹ See National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/national-scientific-council-on-the-developing-child/>

²² See Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) for State Indicator Reports on Fruits and Vegetables, <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/data-statistics/2018-state-indicator-report-fruits-vegetables.html>

²³ See Sheila Zedlewski, Elian Waxman, and Craig Gundersen (2012, July) for more information on SNAP’s Role in the Great Recession and beyond, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/snaps-role-great-recession-and-beyond/view/full-report>

RECOMMENDATION #4: To address the Foster Social Equity Grand Challenge in Public Administration, and given the impact of the coronavirus on food-insecure households, the Working Group recommends that the SNAP benefit be increased by 15% to eligible households to help pay for food during the COVID-19 crisis.

RECOMMENDATION #5: To coordinate effort among many federal agencies, track the implementation of programs and services, and evaluate the impact in high priority areas, the Working Group supports executive action for a coordinated effort described in the GAO-18-41SP Child Well-Being. To inform Congress and provide support for the impact of the Farm to School program, we further recommend the establishment of a cross-site evaluation system that relies on standardized data as well as an assessment of activities and outputs contributing to the outcome of improving child well-being and reducing food insecurity.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, widespread disruptions due to the coronavirus pandemic underscore the urgency to prioritize resources that improve the health and wellbeing of children living in households experiencing economic instability, increased vulnerability, and food insecurity. The Working Group supports executive action for a coordinated effort described in the GAO-18-41SP Child Well-Being to coordinate efforts among many federal agencies, track the implementation of programs and services, and evaluate the impact in high priority areas. To avoid an eventual tradeoff between basic needs and nutritionally adequate meals, we recommend that this Executive Action to ensure early care and education settings receive priority consideration for food nutrition programs.

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Social Equity: Evidence-Based Policy Working Group

Margaret C. Simms, Working Group Chair

Non Resident Fellow, Labor, Human Services, and Population, Urban Institute; Institute Fellow and Director, Low Income Working Families Project, Labor, Human Services and Population, Urban Institute; Senior Research Associate and Program Director, Human Resources Policy, Urban Institute; Deputy Director and Director of Research, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; Vice President, Research, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; Assistant Professor and then Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Atlanta University; Acting Assistant Professor, Board of Economics, Stevenson College, University of California at Santa Cruz.

RaJade M. Berry-James

Evaluator, Center for Environmental Farming Systems, North Carolina State University; Executive Trainer, Accreditation Institute, NASPAA; Resident Fellow, Genetic Engineering & Society, North Carolina State University; Faculty Liaison, Institutional Equity & Diversity, North Carolina State University; Associate Professor, Public Administration, North Carolina State University; Director of Graduate Programs, Public Administration, North Carolina State University; Evaluator, Disproportionate Minority Contact, Summit County Juvenile Court, Ohio; Evaluator, Institute for Health and Social Policy, The University of Akron; Associate Professor, Public Administration and Urban Studies, The University of Akron; Assistant Professor, Public Administration and Urban Studies, The University of Akron; MPA Program Coordinator/Assistant Professor, Government and Sociology, Georgia College & State University; Special Assistant to the President, Office of the President, Kean University; Assistant to the Dean, School of Liberal Arts, Kean University; Associate Director, Institutional Research, Kean University; Assistant Director, Institutional Research, Kean University; Research Assistant, Educational Opportunity Fund Program, New Jersey Department of Higher Education.

Gary Glickman

Former Managing Director, Health & Public Service Innovation, Accenture. Senior Policy Advisor, US Department of Treasury; Coordinator, Partnership Fund for Program Integrity Innovation, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Executive Office of the President; President and CEO, Imadgen LLC; President and CEO, Giesecke and Devrient Cardtech; President and Chief Marketing Officer, Maximus; President, Phoenix Planning & Evaluation, Ltd.; Principal/ National Director, Federal Consulting, Laventhol & Horwath; Practice leader, Financial Institutions Division, Orkand Corporation; Senior Consultant, Deloitte Consulting, LLP.; Team Member, Office of the Secretary, US Department of the Treasury; Chief, Financial Management Division, Office of the Comptroller of the City of New York.

Demetra Nightingale

Institute Fellow, Urban Institute; Professorial Lecturer, Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration, George Washington University; Former Chief Evaluation Officer, U.S. Department of Labor; Senior Fellow, The Urban Institute; Principal Research Scientist/Research Professor, Institute for Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University. Former positions with The Urban Institute: Affiliated Scholar, Labor and Social Policy Center; Principal Research Associate, Labor and Social Policy Center; Director, Welfare and Training Research Program, Human Resources Policy Center; Acting Director, Human Resources Policy Center; Senior Research Associate, Human Resources Policy Center; Research Associate I, Human Resources Policy Center. Former Research Analyst, Kappa Systems, Inc. Former positions with The Urban Institute: Research Associate I, Employment and Labor Policy Program; Research Associate II, Government Organization and Management Program. Positions with the Institutional Analysis Program, The Urban Institute: Research Associate II; Research Associate.

Staff

Joseph P. Mitchell, III

Director of Strategic Initiatives and International Programs, National Academy of Public Administration; Member, National Science Foundation Business and Operations Advisory Committee; Associate Director, Office of Shared Services and Performance Improvement, General Services Administration; Director of Academy Programs, National Academy of Public Administration; Project Director, Senior Analyst, and Research Associate, National Academy of Public Administration.

James Higgins

Research Associate for Grand Challenges in Public Administration, National Academy of Public Administration; Researcher, Cohen Group; Extern, U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

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