

Testimony of Audrey Henson, CEO and Founder, College to Congress

Before the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee on Legislative Branch, Committee on Appropriations

March 4, 2020

Executive Summary

Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the College to Congress (C2C) budget request for Fiscal Year 2021. First and foremost, College to Congress would like to express appreciation for the Subcommittee's continued support for bipartisan improvements to create a more efficient and effective House of Representatives. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress is a current example of bipartisan productivity and one of its Members, Representative William Timmons (R-S.C.) was inducted as a College to Congress Co-Chair last year. He has seen how these recommendations have improved the overall intern experience in our nation's Capital. I am before you today to advocate for how we can continue this improvement.

At College to Congress we are creating a more inclusive and effective Congress by recruiting, training, supporting, and placing low-income students from across the country in internships for their representatives in Washington, DC. In the last four years, we have worked alongside 76 Representatives and Senators to create pathways for students from disadvantaged, rural, and low-income backgrounds. We assess their need using the Pell Grant, a need-based federal grant for undergraduates designated as low-income.¹ According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students who receive the Pell Grant are poorer, more likely to be from underrepresented backgrounds, and are more likely to be female.²

I was a Pell Grant recipient. I was also an intern and entry-level staffer who has worked in the House and Senate. I founded College to Congress to support students who are passionate about public service but do not have the means to work an unpaid internship in Washington, DC. I hope you hear their stories through my voice in my testimony today. I have come before you today to ask for your consideration and additional support for the students that we serve at College to Congress, the women and men

¹ <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html>

² <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/tablesaddl.asp>

looking ahead to become our next generation of public servants with the following measures:

- The establishing of a dedicated Human Resources Office for standardized and formal onboarding of all incoming congressional staff
- College to Congress expands the impact of the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion to help recruit and retain existing diverse staff by providing staff training resources
- Raise the benefit caps of the student loan repayment program for current and future staffers to drive additional recruitment, retention, and diversity in the candidate pool

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our FY 2021 budget request. College to Congress will continue to work closely with the Subcommittee to ensure that we successfully accomplish our mission to empower the public servants of the next generation.

Thank you.

House of Representatives Human Resources Office

Of the FY 2021 budget, we request that a total of \$1,000,000 annually to establish a dedicated “House Office of Human Resources”. As the College to Congress team has grown, we have had the honor of participating in Staff Up Congress, joined the Fix Congress cohort, and have helped make intern funding available to both the House and the Senate. We have spent hundreds of hours speaking with leaders on the Hill who want to help recruit and retain diverse staff. The House is a unique environment that requires highly specialized professional development and career advancement curriculum. The House of Representatives Human Resources Office would address the scope of:

- **Onboarding:**
 - Improving and standardizing the orientation and education given to new interns and congressional staff. This can be accomplished by matching interns and staff with internal resources, such as those offered through the Congressional Staff Academy, and by leveraging external resources, such as the training programs offered by College to Congress and by organizations within the Fix Congress cohort
- **Personnel Evaluation:**

- **Provide Career Progression Pathways:** interns looking to advance in their congressional careers often have few resources offered (outside of word of mouth) to illustrate the career paths towards achieving high-level staff positions such as Communications Director or Chief of Staff
- **Streamlined Recruitment:** similar to the Common App that is used by undergraduate institutions for offering a simplified way to apply to multiple educational programs at once, this office could house a “Common App for the Hill” which could also serve the purpose of a resume bank of students interested in interning on the Hill but do not have the direct connections and relationships to learn about openings
- **Employee Performance:** a dedicated human resources office can establish and house records of performance that can bolster letters of recommendation and career advancement for Hill staff
- **Compensation:**
 - Oversee the process of establishing permanent funding for interns
 - Provide examples and Best Practices around individual office intern funding that can demonstrate the best way to use appropriated intern funding, such as Fellowships, stipends, etc.

Expanding the impact of House Office of Diversity and Inclusion

Of the FY 2021 budget, we request that a total of \$250,000 annually to expand the impact of the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion. In 2019, College to Congress and the George Washington University conducted a survey which revealed that 86% of Hill Staffers were interested in more professional development training. College to Congress holds a week-long bootcamp to educate our accepted interns on the unique responsibilities that congressional offices require. In order to properly scale our training program to offer it to incoming interns and entry-level staff, we submit the following support measures.

College to Congress would like to request:

1. Of the FY 2021 requested amount, College to Congress also requests that an annual budget of \$250,000 be added to the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion designated for a community engagement strategy. This funding would cover, but is not limited to, providing travel funds and support for the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion and College to Congress to visit relevant educational departments and to educate college students on opportunities for a career in public service.

2. Strengthening the data collection responsibility of the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion by creating a form similar to the Office of Personnel Management's Standard Form 181, which provides an optional opportunity for all incoming staff to declare their own race and national origin identities. By housing this form within the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion, this would be a cost-effective way to potentially document the diversity of incoming staff and build data to track potential trends and efficacy in hiring and retention practices.

Student Loan Repayment Program Expansion

As we get closer to determining the FY 2021 budget, I ask that you consider expanding the benefit caps of the student loan repayment program for the House from 10% of their salary (no more than \$500) to 15%.³ College to Congress was founded to address the needs of students who are passionate about public service but do not have the means to take an unpaid summer internship. Resources offered to graduates who have student debt include the House and Senate student loan repayment programs. The program purports "this is a program designed to help attract talented people to careers in public service since they can generally find higher salaries in the private sector." The House of Representatives created a similar program in 2003. There is a \$60,000 cap on loan forgiveness in the U.S. House of Representatives (\$10,000 per year) and a \$40,000 cap in the U.S. Senate (\$6,000 per year).

College to Congress received over 1,500 applications for our summer internship scholarship this past summer. The talent pool of students who are passionate about serving our country exists, but their socioeconomic status as a Pell Grant recipient means they are coming from disadvantaged, rural, and low-income backgrounds. The Federal Pell Grant helps ensure access to postsecondary education for low- and moderate-income undergraduate students by providing grants that help meet postsecondary education costs. Pell Grant data indicates that 67% of the Pell Grant recipients have federal student loans.⁴ With the average annual salary of a Staff Assistant being \$42,000, and with Washington, DC being the fourth most expensive city in the country according to Fox 5,⁵ in order to improve its efficacy and to truly offer a competitive edge to the nation's best and brightest, expanding this benefit beyond the current caps for current and future staffers would drive additional recruitment, retention,

³ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/655>

⁴ National Postsecondary Student Aid Study 2015-16, Table 5 and Beginning Postsecondary Students Study 2003:04

⁵ <https://www.fox5dc.com/news/d-c-named-4th-most-expensive-u-s-city>

and diversity in the candidate pool, including becoming a viable option for students with advanced degrees in both law and advanced tech fields.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee in support of the FY 2021 appropriations requests. We hope that you will consider College to Congress as a resource and partner in advancing our shared goal in improving our democracy, modernizing congress, and empowering the next generation of public servants.