The House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

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

Good afternoon Chair Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons, Members of the Committee, staffers, and of course: interns. Thank you for having me back here today to provide recommendations on how to improve Congressional internships. My name is Audrey Henson, and I am the founder and CEO of College to Congress, a nonpartisan nonprofit I founded in 2016 intending to systemically change Congress by empowering a diverse, inclusive, and effective generation of public servants. C2C is known for its internship program that provides financial assistance to Pell Grant students that want to intern in D.C. but otherwise could not afford to due to socio-economic barriers. We provide a pipeline of minority and low-income students for your office, but in 2020 we launched C2C-University, a free online curriculum, and the country's premier Capitol Hill intern training platform. So far, we have trained more than 800 prospective interns--90% of whom have found full-time employment in the public sector—expanding our impact beyond our traditional internship program. I am here before you today to deliver innovative and out-of-the-box solutions that I believe that Congress can adopt in order to help fix a problem having profound negative impacts not only in your offices but also back home in your districts.

Internship opportunities are the hallmarks of Members of Congress's tenures. We all know a Congressional internship oftentimes leads to a job on the Hill, a career in public service, or inspires a future run for political office, but what about the vast majority of interns who end up going back to your districts? Although an internship on Capitol Hill impacts that one student tremendously—it should not end there. The knowledge and skills learned in our nation's leading institution should have an exponential ripple effect impacting dozens if not hundreds of others to become more civically engaged and view Congress more favorably. To encourage this outcome, you must ensure internships are meaningful, engaging, and an overwhelmingly positive experience by guaranteeing that interns have the training necessary to succeed and streamlining the application process.

To guarantee that interns are adequately trained to succeed on day one and to ensure that a hill internship is right for them--we recommend partnering with C2C to provide training and resources before they arrive in your office. Each office has the sole responsibility of shaping its internship program and equipping interns with skills that lead to a future filled with professional and personal success. What happens if an office is unable to provide the world-class experience we all strive for? Maybe their intern coordinator has a limited amount of time to spend with the interns due to their already heavy workload, or it is appropriations season, and legislative staffers cannot spend as much one-on-one time with the interns. That is why Congress desperately needs standardized training for all incoming interns before they arrive. As mentioned earlier, C2C has trained more than 800 prospective interns on our free, online curriculum, C2C-University, which has led to 90% of our alumnae finding full-time employment in the public sector. Our coursework teaches interns the ins and outs of Congress, from answering the phones to introducing legislation so that they are ready to serve your office and constituents on day one. C2C-U prepares them for successful and meaningful experiences and helps students decide

beforehand whether they are actually interested in a career on Capitol Hill before spending their entire summer, semester, or savings trying out something they don't like, which has the added benefit of creating a better match for your office. We recommend Congress engages in a public-private partnership with C2C to equip prospective and current interns with the skills to be successful in your office and beyond.

Much like the actual internship program, the application process is a logistical nightmare for students and offices. Each office has different requirements and dates ranging from office to office, making it challenging to find the right fit. One straightforward solution to help fix this problem would be for the house to adopt a standard application that all offices would use to make it more accessible for interns to apply and more manageable for offices to find the right interns. The common application would ask basic questions and include written answers like why they want to intern in Congress, what policy issues they are interested in, and what leadership or management style they prefer to work for. A standard application ensures the intern matches the right office, participates in the most meaningful opportunity available, and streamlines the process of finding your constituents interested in interning by hosting the applications in a centralized portal easily accessible and sortable by Congressional district, areas of interest, and so on.

Members of Congress have an obligation to their constituents to provide a world-class opportunity that benefits not only their office but their communities back home. An internship can serve as a gateway to a career on Capitol Hill, but for those that take their talents elsewhere, we should strive to leave a lasting impact that shapes the future of so many more that do not come to Capitol Hill. We all agree that interns deserve to be paid more and that we should expand the availability of remote internships, but what good does it do if they aren't meaningful experiences? We at C2C strongly believe that Congress can provide these meaningful opportunities by creating a public partnership with us, using a standard application that all house offices can access, and ensuring every opportunity is meaningful.