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Re: Professionalizing & Enriching the Congressional Internship and Fellowship Experience
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Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and distinguished Members of the U.S. House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

I am here before you because a paid congressional internship changed my life. As a Congressional Black Caucus Foundation intern, I observed the inner workings of Congress, which provided me with an education on democratic institutions that far surpassed anything I learned as a political science major in college. At the same time, I witnessed the shortcomings of Congress as an institution, where people of color are underrepresented in the congressional workplace overall and are conspicuously absent from top staff positions. This work experience set me along a path to become a sociologist and I have spent my academic career studying how inequality in the congressional workplace is created and maintained, and its effects on our democracy.

Today, I want to discuss one dimension of my research — and what I believe to be one of the most important reforms that Congress can adopt to improve racial representation in its workforce: collecting the data necessary to see and fight inequality.

In 2018, Congress passed legislation to provide House and Senate offices with allowances for paid internships. I led a research project for Pay Our Interns that investigated who congressional offices hired with these allowances during the first year that this funding was available in 2019. Sadly, we found that these paid opportunities were unequally distributed along racial lines. In our report, “Who Congress Pays,” we show that White students were overrepresented and Black and Latino students were underrepresented among paid interns.¹ For example, White students make up only 52 percent of the national undergraduate population but accounted for 76 percent of paid interns. In contrast, Black and Latino students make up 15 and 20 percent of the undergraduate population, but accounted for 6.7 and 7.9 percent of paid interns, respectively.

These findings are disappointing for many reasons, but chief among them is that we know that internships often lead to paid staff positions. In a recent study of congressional staff, over 50 percent indicated that they started their careers on Capitol Hill as interns.² As such, the underrepresentation of people of color among paid interns directly contributes to the underrepresentation of people of color among legislative staff.

¹ Jones, James R., Tiffany Win and Carlos Mark Vera. 2021. "Who Congress Pays: Analysis of Lawmakers' Use of Intern Allowances in the 116th Congress." Washington D.C.: Pay Our Interns

² Furnas, Alexander C. and Timothy M. LaPira. 2020. "Congressional Brain Drain: Legislative Capacity in the 21st Century." Washington D.C.: New America Foundation

Paying congressional interns for their labor is an important first step in strengthening congressional capacity, however, as my research indicates, there is still much more work to be done. There is a need for more funding to pay interns a living wage and congressional offices should adopt more diverse recruitment practices. However, increasing racial representation among congressional interns is not just about resources and recruitment, it is also about establishing and promoting transparent hiring practices. Let me explain how this all works together.

As I see it, what sets Congress apart from the many other workplaces that are majority-white is that the congressional workplace is exempt from many federal workplace laws. These exemptions have made Congress a non-transparent and insular work institution and they are a key mechanism through which racial inequality is created and maintained.

For example, Congress does not collect demographic data about the racial and gender identities of its workers. Most employers are required by federal law to collect these data, a process which is often a part of new employee onboarding. These demographic data have been an invaluable resource for researchers to investigate the presence of discrimination in large and small organizations nationwide. Put simply, these data help determine racial and gender disparities in pay, promotion, and retention.

Unfortunately, members of Congress have exempted themselves from these demographic reporting requirements. This lack of transparency makes the congressional workplace a black box where racial inequality is allowed to fester undisturbed. It also denies voters the ability to hold their elected officials accountable for hiring staff and interns who look like them. In a democracy, the perspectives of voters is paramount. In order for them to make informed decisions about how they are represented, they need information. This opacity is, in a sense, a threat to our democratic process and an inclusive multiracial democracy.

Last year, Representative Pete Aguilar successfully proposed an amendment to the 2020 Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill to collect the demographic information of all paid House interns as a method of improving transparency and racial representation. Despite the fact that this spending bill did not pass, this type of proposed reform is a step in the right direction.

Congress needs to collect and publish demographic data on fellows and on paid *and* unpaid interns to ensure that these work opportunities are equitably distributed. Data collection should include information about race and gender as well as other important factors like socioeconomic status in order to identify if those from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds are able to work in the People's House. To be sure, these data alone will not solve the problem of an unrepresentative class of interns and fellows, however, we cannot address this vexing democratic dilemma without it. This information is vital for understanding the scope of the problem, setting benchmarks, and measuring progress.

It matters who works in the halls of Congress. It is often said that today's interns are tomorrow's leaders. Today, the highest ranking women in government, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Kamala Harris, both began their political careers as congressional interns. It is vital that Congress does everything possible to ensure that the leaders of tomorrow reflect the diversity of this country. To do this Congress must adopt diverse and transparent hiring practices.