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# The D.C. connection

## Presidential Management Fellows reflect on the learning curve in government service

Graduation and the bar exam are behind them, and they've been on the job for the better part of a year. So UB Law's most recent Presidential Management Fellows – five 2010 graduates who accepted offers in Washington, D.C., under the federal government's highly competitive program to train its next generation of leaders – are in a position to reflect a little bit.

UB Law Forum asked each of them about their work, the intricacies of government service and life in the nation's capital.



**Natalie Williams** is working with the Federal Railroad Administration, part of the Department of Transportation, as a financial analyst for the agency's Railroad Rehabilitation & Improvement

Financing Program. There she analyzes loan applications and helps maintain the agency's loan portfolio.

The subject is new to her – “All I had done was ride Amtrak,” she says – but she brings to the agency a background and interest in finance. “It's a world apart,” she says of working in this area. “I'm still learning about the railroad industry and applying my financial skills. It's really challenging work, something different each day.”

The work involves evaluating the creditworthiness of the applicants, their financial statements and history, and projecting future financials to

evaluate borrowers' ability to repay a capital loan. Many applicants are small railroads looking for money to lay new track or buy new rail cars.

“I closed my first loan recently,” Williams says. “It was a smaller loan, but to the company getting the loan it's very important and very valuable. It was a small railroad in Mississippi, and this is going to be huge for them. It was pretty fulfilling to get that approved, knowing that it's going to help out this small railroad.”



Over at the Small Business Administration, **Mathew Pascarella** – whose J.D. was earned with a financial transactions concentration – is also doing financial analysis, in the SBA's Office of the Chief Financial

Officer. “We handle the budget, giving out the money to all the different program offices that are implementing our programs, and tracking that money to see how well these programs are doing and if they're meet-

ing their goals,” he says. There's also a regulatory compliance piece, for which his Law School training is most directly applicable.

“I really like where I'm at. It's extremely valuable if you want a career in the federal government,” Pascarella says of the Presidential Management Fellowship program. “I've learned a lot about how agencies operate at this level. It has just been an education in how the federal government operates.”



**Heather Strachan's** assignment has been with the high-profile Federal Emergency Management Agency, part of the Department of Homeland Security. There she has been involved with two distinct

projects. In the agency's human capital department, she has been working on policies and procedures for FEMA's PMF program, including policies on how fellows can rotate into other positions within the agency. And, working with the chief counsel's office, she is helping to develop a series of podcasts on legal topics related to FEMA's work, to be launched internally and then to the world on the Internet.

“One of the great things about the PMF program is that it's a way into the federal government,” Strachan says. “The idea is that you come in and

they want you to be a leader of the agency in the future, sort of a future management supervisor track. The other component is, you have to do at least one rotation outside your agency. That gives you an opportunity to see how other agencies work and expand on your skill sets." In June she will begin a rotation in the Human Rights Law Division of the Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"It's interesting," she says of working at this level. "There can be a lot of bureaucracy you have to go through to get something done. But you can work on policies that impact a large population of people and can be really important, and you have opportunities to meet people you wouldn't otherwise meet. It's a great place to be."



With a Law School background in family law, **Margo Brown** began her PMF assignment in the Department of Health and Human Services, in the Office of Child Support Enforcement of the Adminis-

tration for Children and Families. There she worked in the policy division, working on ways to more effectively share information – much of it about responses to domestic violence – with other federal agencies, and participating in the ongoing policy-making work of the division. In January she took on something completely

different: a three-month rotation at the Department of Energy, working in the chief counsel's office of the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy, which promotes and funds research and development of advanced energy technologies. After that rotation, she'll return to Health and Human Services.

"It's rewarding to have a part in something that you know is going to affect people down the road," Brown says. "It's a great opportunity, because you're always around people and making connections. That's how D.C. is – it's important to know people."

Another advantage: the opportunity to work, on a flextime basis, four 10-hour days, leaving her time to do pro bono work.



**Jenna Moran** ended up at Health and Human Services, too, beginning her PMF stint at the National Institutes of Health. Her passion at UB Law was labor and employment law, and an externship

at Erie County Medical Center cemented that interest. She has parlayed that experience and training into a human resources track at NIH.

In one assignment, she worked on implementing a presidential memorandum on hiring reform. President Obama's directive was to shorten the

hiring process for federal positions, to make the process more transparent to applicants and to get agency managers more involved. "I became a point person at my agency to take that presidential memo and implement it into the day-to-day functions of our human resources office," Moran says.

She points out that the Presidential Management Fellowship program encompasses not just law graduates, but smart people with training in disciplines such as public health, business and social work. "Everybody is bringing something different to the table, and it's definitely a very dynamic place to be," she says. "The great thing about being in a PMF cohort is that everyone is really engaged and wants to know more than they necessarily need to. They really give us some great opportunities to be involved."

"The PMF program is perfect for someone who wants to use their legal degree in a non-traditional way. This was the perfect place for me to end up."

