



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service



Photograph taken by Ken Scheffe

Student Handbook for the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP)

STUDENT CAREER EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

Students are to keep a daily written log of their activities.

At the end of every month, the supervisor will initial and date the log. A copy of the activity log is to be forwarded to the respective Area Conservationist (or State Soil Scientist if a Soils SCEP).

Students will present a professional PowerPoint presentation about their tour to the New Mexico Leadership Team (typically in August). The presentation should be five to ten minutes in length. The following topics should be included in the reports:

1. A brief summary of student's background, both personal and academic.
2. Student's career goals upon graduation.
3. Describe at least ten activities performed during the SCEP tour. For each activity, address the following criteria:
 - a. Provided a challenge to student's technical knowledge of the subject matter.
 - b. Gave student an opportunity to apply what has been learned at school to real life situations.
 - c. Helped student understand how the activity contributes to the administration of NRCS programs to the public.
 - d. Helped student understand how the activity plays a role in conservation planning.
 - e. Whether student enjoyed the activity and why.

SCEP PROGRAM GENERAL INFORMATION

The program provides a plan of educational instruction and work experience which is designed to strengthen occupations in the federal service. The program provides a source of qualified, well educated professionals to fill entry level positions.

The program provides for the integration of academic studies and federal work experience and can assist in meeting the following objectives:

1. For the Natural Resources Conservation Service:
 - provides an effective recruiting source for meeting long-range staffing goals
 - permits selections for career jobs based on proven academic and work performance
 - increases productivity and reduces initial training costs
 - brings new educational methods and concepts into the work force
 - builds stronger relationships between educators and federal employers

2. For students:
 - applies classroom theory to “real world” work experiences
 - provides an opportunity to work with latest technologies actually used in the work place
 - serves as a method to explore options before choosing a career
 - demonstrates job opportunities available in agriculture and natural resource disciplines
 - assists in meeting financial obligations by earning, while learning provides work experience in the public sector, increasing job potential upon graduation.

RESPONSIBILITIES IN FEDERAL STUDENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

The Federal Agency's Role:

Designate a staff member to maintain liaison with the qualifying educational institution.

Inform school of work experience opportunities and provide adequate job descriptions promptly.

Establish work schedules consistent with the school's academic calendar that enable students to complete the program.

Orient the student to the NRCS mission, policies and procedures.

Select appointees referred by schools in accordance with EEO principles.

Process all personnel actions and keep necessary records related to student employment.

Provide quality work assignments related to the student's academic studies or career goals where they can learn and be productive.

Conduct appraisals and counsel students regarding their performance, complete necessary forms, and share progress reports with schools.

Notify the school of changes in a student's status.

The School's Role:

Designate a representative to work with the SCEP Coordinator.

Correlate work and study in a manner that will expand the student's educational development.

Furnish the agency with requested information related to student's educational development.

Monitor academic progress.

Inform the Federal agency of any change in a student's status, including reports on a student's progress and performance.

The Student's Role:

Provide the SCEP Coordinator with transcripts at the end of every semester or quarter.

Adhere to NRCS's work schedule, policies and procedures.

Assume personal and professional responsibilities for actions and activities.

Use a courteous, enthusiastic, and professional approach to policies and procedures.

Meet academic, performance, and conduct standards set forth by the school and NRCS.

Provide the supervisor, SCEP Coordinator, and the school with periodic progress reports on the quality of work and study assignments.

Work effectively with peers and trainers.

Notify the school and the SCEP Coordinator of changes in status.

FOLLOW-UP, FOLLOW-UP, FOLLOW-UP

Supervisors:

Keep in touch with the trainee and the trainers to determine if there are any problems.

Provide an environment that permits the trainee to ask questions and discuss problems.

Ask questions to find out if the trainee really understands concepts and assignments.

Keep the trainee fully occupied the first couple of weeks.

Follow up on long-term projects.

Complete student evaluation and return to Human Resources at the end of the summer session.

DEFINITIONS

Accredited Institution or Program is a secondary or post-secondary institution or program that is legally authorized to offer academic programs that lead to a diploma, undergraduate certificate or diploma, or a degree. The institution must be formally recognized by an accrediting agency that has been listed as nationally recognized by the Secretary of Education.

Alternating Periods of Study and Employment means alternating academic terms of classroom study and periods of federal employment.

Student Education is a plan of education that provides for:

Alternating or parallel periods of study and employment working agreements among the agency, educational institution and student paid work experiences related to the student's academic studies or career goals work experiences which are supervised and evaluated experience sufficient in duration to qualify for career entry.

Qualified Curriculum is a course of study at a school or university that leads to qualification of the student for an NRCS position. A student must be enrolled in a qualified curriculum approved by NRCS to remain in the program.

Parallel Periods of Study and Employment means concurrent periods of classroom study and federal employment of students, carrying at least a half-time academic course load and working a minimum of about 16 hours per week.

Student means a person who is at least 16 years of age; a United States citizen; and otherwise eligible for federal employment (meets the normal requirements for hiring-physical, mental, etc.).

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What kind of work will I be doing?

The work you will be doing is related to your field of study such as Soil Science, Agronomy, Engineering, Range Management, Soil Conservation, Wildlife Biology, etc. The level of work you perform and the amount of responsibilities you have will depend on how advanced you are in your formal classroom studies and work periods. Your supervisor will go over your position description with you and answer any questions you have about what work is expected of you in your position. Do not hesitate to ask questions at any time about what you are to be doing.

Where will my job be located?

Positions are located throughout New Mexico in a variety of locations: metropolitan areas, smaller towns, and perhaps in remote and/or isolated areas. Make sure you find out what the location is like. You may want information on the availability of functions, such as sporting events, public transportation, movie theaters, etc.

What are the working conditions in the office?

The working conditions in the office will vary depending on where you work. All offices are smoke free. In some offices, eating facilities are immediately available either in the same building or within walking distance. There are offices where you may have to take your lunch. In those instances, a refrigerator and microwave are usually available. The first day at work you should ask about office policies concerning use of government telephones, personal cell phones, breaks, etc.

What are the housing/living conditions like?

In smaller towns apartments may not be available. In the absence of apartments, you may need to commute to work or perhaps rent a room in a private home. In metropolitan areas you will be able to find rentals. Be prepared to stay in a motel for a few days if you have not secured housing before you arrive. Extended stay lodging may also be an option for you. It is a good idea to find out what weather conditions you can expect, to ensure you bring the right kind of clothing.

Will I receive Payment of Lodging Expenses?

No. You will receive a one-time stipend of \$1,000 less applicable taxes.

New Mexico offers a stipend of \$1,000 (less applicable taxes) per each summer work session. The stipend can be used for lodging expenses, subsistence expenses or transportation expenses. A statement of understanding must be signed.

Statement of Understanding for Stipend Allowance

1. The student must agree that upon receipt of the \$1,000 stipend, he/she will remain with the Natural Resources Conservation Service for the length of the Summer SCEP Program.
2. If the student does not remain with the NRCS for entire summer work session, they must reimburse the Agency for the prorated amount of the stipend.

The stipend, minus applicable taxes, will be sent to your direct deposit account within 4 weeks of the start date for your employment.

The stipend is a taxable benefit under the Federal Tax Code. The tax withheld from the payment is not a reimbursable expense. The stipend will be processed through the National Finance Center (NFC). NFC will make payment to your bank account, withhold taxes, and include the allowance on the W-2 form.

When will I get my first pay check?

Federal employees get paid on a biweekly basis. These are referred to as a pay period and there are 26 a year. You will receive your pay check approximately 12 days after the pay period ends. Your check will be direct-deposited to a financial institution. This means you should have established an account at a bank, credit union, or some other financial institution before your first day of work.

Do I get paid for holidays?

You will get paid for holidays if you are scheduled to work and have been in a pay status either the day prior to or the day after the holiday. If you are working a part-time schedule, you will get paid only for the hours you would be scheduled to work on the holiday.

Am I entitled to vacation time (annual leave) and do I get paid if I am sick and have to stay home?

Students earn both sick and annual leave. If you are working fulltime, you earn 4 hours of annual and sick leave every pay period. If you are working part-time, you earn 1 hour each of annual and sick leave for every 20 hours you work. You can accumulate up to 240 hours (6 weeks) of annual leave and carry it over from one year to the next. There is no limit on the amount of sick leave you can accumulate. You do not earn leave for working a partial pay period.

Annual leave must be requested from your supervisor whenever you need to be away from work for personal reasons. Sick leave is used for illness and personal medical related absences, such as dentist appointments, and must also be approved by your supervisor.

Who pays my expenses if I have to travel?

Students apply for a government travel card. You will be reimbursed for most expenses incurred during your travel. Please refer to: <http://www.gsa.gov>, then go to products and services and select the travel option for additional information regarding travel cards. Make sure you understand what receipts are required, how to create a travel authorization and how to complete a travel voucher, and what expenses are allowable before you travel. Your supervisor can answer questions you might have on travel policies. For per diem rates, go to: <http://www.gsa.gov>, then select per diem rates and click the state of New Mexico on the map.

Can I receive awards for the work I do?

Yes, as a Federal employee you are eligible to receive awards for performance, superior accomplishment, honorary, and other monetary and external awards based upon your contributions and the benefits to the Federal Government.

What is the difference between the standards of performance and conduct?

Standards of performance are established so you can determine what tasks you must perform and at what level in order to perform your position in a fully satisfactory manner. You should receive your performance standards within the first 30 days of your initial appointment. Your supervisor will discuss them with you. If you do not fully understand them, or if you have questions about your standards later on, ask your supervisor to clarify their meaning. Your performance rating will be used to determine how well you are doing in the program. It will be used to identify your strengths and weakness as a basis for recommending elective courses, determining if your performance in your current position warrants a promotion, or deciding whether or not you should remain in SCEP.

Standards of conduct address how you conduct yourself both on the job and outside of work. Everyone entering into public service for the United States has a duty to the American people to maintain the highest standards of integrity in Government. You must observe all ethics and law regulations, including the general principles from *The Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch* (provided in your new employee packet).

What do I need to learn about my job?

Your supervisor will prepare an Individual Development Plan (IDP) before or soon after you report to work. This plan will outline the knowledge and skills you need to gain or strengthen and will include how the knowledge and skills will be developed during your work and study periods. The plan can include training strategies other than the courses you plan to take in college, such as readings, videotapes, rotation assignments, as well as on the job training. Your supervisor will evaluate your progress periodically and change/update your IDP as needed.

If I do not like my job, can I transfer to another Government office?

If you do not like your job, the first thing you should do is discuss it with your supervisor. Some thoughts of what might be happening; are my job duties related to my field of study; are my job duties above or below what I have learned in the classroom; do I understand what I am really suppose to be doing; am I discovering that perhaps I have not made a good choice about my field of study; do I have a personality conflict with my supervisor; are the office politics not conducive to my way of thinking/working; etc. After the discussion with your supervisor, if you think it is to your advantage to look elsewhere, contact your SCEP Coordinator.

Can I Get Promoted?

Yes, you can get promoted when you meet the qualification requirements and if your performance has been satisfactory in your current position. The operating manual for Qualification Standards for general Schedule positions is a set of standards that have been developed for government wide use outlining the education and/or experience requirements one must have to qualify for a specific job at each grade level.

Can a student appointed to the SCEP program remain on the appointment once they have completed their educational requirements?

Students appointed to the program may continue on the student appointment for 120 days beyond the date of completing their work and academic requirements. If the student has not been converted to another appointment within the 120 day period, he/she must be separated from federal service.

Do students get within-grade increases?

Yes. Students are eligible for within-grade increases. Unless you are working year round, it is unlikely that you will receive a within-grade increase.

Can students work less than 16 hours a week?

Yes. Hours of duty must be agreed upon by the supervisor and the HRO.

May students alternate between school and work (e.g. work full-time this semester and next semester go to school full-time, and not work at all)?

Yes. The student, school and agency work together to accommodate the academic needs of the student and the work related needs of the agency. There must be a written agreement between the agency and the school to establish a prearranged schedule of school and work. Students must notify the HRO of any change to the agreement, such as sitting out a semester.

Is a student only eligible for noncompetitive conversion in the agency where the student worked prior to the completion of his/her education?

No. A student is eligible to be noncompetitively converted in any Federal agency. The Human Resource Office will try to place the graduates with other agencies, if placement in NRCS/NM is not possible.

Can I receive tuition assistance and help with travel expenses to go back to school?

New Mexico offers a stipend of \$1,000 (less taxes) per each summer work session to students assigned to an official duty station that is located a minimum of 50 miles from the institution of higher education attended by the student.

For additional information, please go to:

<http://www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/personnel/scep-employees.html>

BENEFITS

Students are considered permanent employees, and as such, are entitled to the benefits described below:

- **Retirement.** Students are covered by the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS). For information, go to - <http://www.opm.gov/retire/pre/fers/index.asp>
- **Life and Health Insurance.** Students whose employment under the program is scheduled to continue for more than one year and who are expected to be in a pay status for at least one-third of the total time from date of appointment to completion of the program are eligible to elect both federal life insurance and health benefits plans. For information, go to - <http://www.opm.gov/insure/>
- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** This program helps employees resolve and work problems through professional assistance. For information, go to - <http://www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/personnel/eap.html>
- **Leave.** Students who are in a work status on regularly scheduled tours of duty will accrue annual and sick leave and are eligible for military leave. Unused leave is carried over to the next work period. Students whose work schedule includes federal holidays will be paid the hours that would have been worked on the holiday. For information, go to - <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/> (GM-360-415A-Subpart A-General).
- **Expenses.** Students may be reimbursed for the out-of-pocket travel and transportation expenses from duty stations and schools between student work experiences and study. However, when converted to a permanent employee, NRCS can only pay for the movement of household goods and mileage between your old duty station and the new duty station.

WORK SCHEDULES

Work may be scheduled on a full-time or part-time basis.

Hours of work will be discussed with you by your supervisor. Students may be assigned to work with one or more employees, and could be required to work the same hours as the trainer. Be sure you have a clear understanding of your work hours the first day you report for work. Also find out what the office policy is regarding whom to call and by what time if you are sick or have an emergency and cannot report to work.

Leave without pay, commonly referred to as LWOP, means you are still an employee of the Federal Government, but that you are in a non-pay status at the time.

For information, go to - <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/> (GM Title 360 Part 427; NRCS Tours of Duty).

For a list of Federal Holidays, please to go –

http://www.opm.gov/Operating_Status_Schedules/fedhol/2009.asp

REQUIREMENTS FOR INITIAL APPOINTMENT

Students are considered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as Student Trainees. The following are the grade determinants NRCS New Mexico will use for initial appointments:

<u>GRADE</u>	<u>LEVEL OF EDUCATION</u>
GS-1	Enrollment in a high school diploma program
GS-2	High school diploma or equivalent
GS-3	Completion of 1 academic year post-high school study
GS-4	Completion of 2 academic years post-high school study or Associate's degree
GS-5	Completion of 4 academic year's post-high school study leading to a Bachelor's degree or Bachelor's degree
GS-7	Completion of 1 academic year of graduate level education, Bachelor's degree with Superior Academic Achievement (3.5 GPA or top 10% of the class).

PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS

Promotions are governed by the OPM qualification standards and based on satisfactory performance evaluations of work periods:

To GS-2: Continued study in a high school education program and completion of one work period.

To GS-3: Completion of one full semester, or the equivalent, of post-high school study and one work period.

To GS-4: Completion of one academic year of study and two work periods; or completion of 1 ½ academic years of study and one work period.

To GS-5: Completion of 4 years of academic study leading to a Bachelor's or higher degree and 640 work period hours.

To GS-7: Completion of 4 academic years of study (or all the requirements) for a Bachelor's degree with superior academic achievement, which is a 3.5 GPA.

Upon completion of all the requirements for a Bachelor's degree, Student Trainees may be reassigned or promoted in the appropriate target series to GS-5 or GS-7 if they meet the qualification requirements of the target occupation, including minimum education requirements.

NOTE: An academic year is defined as 30 semester hours or 45 quarter hours in an accredited college or university.

CONVERSION TO A PERMANENT APPOINTMENT

NRCS will make every effort to convert a qualified student into a permanent position upon meeting the criteria for graduation.

Students may be converted after educational requirements and work requirements are met. The NRCS has 120 days to noncompetitively convert the student to a permanent position. Students may work during the 120 day conversion period, but such work time may not be used to meet the minimum work hours required for conversion.

PROBATIONARY PERIOD

SCEP work periods are creditable towards completion of the one-year probationary period if the experience is in the same line of work, and contains or is followed by no more than a single break in service that does not exceed 30 calendar days. Leave without pay in excess of 30 calendar days is not creditable and extends the probationary period time by an equal amount.

MENTORING

To assist the students in making a smooth transition to the workplace, mentors will be assigned to the students. The mentor can serve as a communication link for any concerns or problems the student may have; discuss career opportunities, career preparation and career paths and assist the student in building a professional network. Assigned mentors will be members of the New Mexico Leadership Team.

TERMINATION FROM THE PROGRAM

Students will be released from the Student Career Experience Program in the following circumstances:

- Unsatisfactory performance or conduct.
- Unacceptable major in college.
- Unacceptable academic performance (not maintaining at least a C- average).
- Not eligible for conversion. If a student drops out of school, does not graduate, or does not meet the 640 hour work requirement.