

Education Requirements and Skills-Based Assessments in Federal Hiring

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Background

College degrees are required as a minimum qualification for some federal jobs. Recently, Congress, the Biden Administration, and the Trump Administration have demonstrated an interest in removing unnecessary education requirements from some jobs and replacing them with skills-based assessments during the hiring process.

The [Office of Personnel Management \(OPM\)](#) prepares [position classification standards](#) and [qualification standards](#) for federal white-collar occupations. OPM's [General Schedule Operating Manual](#) provides information to federal agencies on the "policies, instructions, and standards used to help determine the qualifications of applicants for federal employment." The position classification standards and accompanying [guides](#) define the occupations, establish official position titles, and describe the various levels of work. The qualification standards describe minimum requirements, including education, for each occupational series and are broad so as to apply government-wide. [According to OPM](#), "Minimum qualifications are used as a first step in identifying applicants who will perform satisfactorily on the job, and to screen out those who are less likely to do so."

An education requirement is a commonly used example of a minimum qualification. Some federal white-collar positions require attainment of a specific college degree or completion of specific academic courses at the baccalaureate or graduate level. [OPM's USAJOBS.gov website](#) explains that jobs that require a college degree in a specific field of study "tend to involve research, scientific, or professional work (such as a specialist in contracts, medicine, engineering, biology, psychology, or accounting)." These college degrees must be obtained from a college with an accreditation that is recognized by the Secretary of Education. Some jobs require a baccalaureate degree but do not specify a particular field. These jobs are typically entry-level. Other jobs do not require a college degree at all. In some cases, [general and specialized work experience](#) may qualify an applicant for some federal white-collar jobs.

Agencies use a [variety of tools](#) to evaluate applicants' qualifications. Assessment tools measure the extent to which candidates can perform some or all of the critical competencies for a position identified through the job analysis. Agencies may select the type of assessment tool to use, which can include written tests, work samples, and structured interviews, among others. OPM guidance states that an agency should select

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an assessment tool based on several factors related to the position and operational issues, such as the competencies identified during the job analysis, expected number of applicants, and grade level of the position to be filled. OPM's [Guide to Better Occupational Questionnaires](#) provides information to federal human resources professionals on developing self-reported occupational questionnaires, which may be used as part of the assessment process.

Executive Order (E.O.) 13932

On June 26, 2020, President Donald Trump issued [Executive Order \(E.O.\) 13932](#), which seeks to alter the federal hiring process by replacing potentially unnecessary education qualifications with skills- and competency-based hiring assessments for some positions. The E.O. defines *assessment* as “any valid and reliable method of collecting information on an individual for the purposes of making a decision about qualification, hiring, placement, promotion, referral, or entry into programs leading to advancement.”

The E.O. requires the OPM director, in collaboration with other officials, to review all job classifications and qualification requirements within the [competitive service](#). All agencies are to work with the OPM director to develop practices to assess candidates on their relevant [knowledge, skills, and abilities \(KSAs\)](#) independent of educational attainment or lack thereof. It also specifies that candidates' self-evaluations of their qualifications are not sufficient and that agencies must require the candidates to prove their qualifications via skills- or competency-based assessments. In addition, it mandates that agencies continually evaluate the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of these assessment techniques.

The E.O. initially gave agencies 120 days from June 26, 2020, to make any changes to job classifications and qualification requirements public and an additional 60 days for these changes to go into effect. On [May 7, 2021](#), the acting director of OPM issued interim guidance pertaining to E.O. 13932 that authorized an extension for the implementation of the E.O.'s requirements until December 31, 2021. On [December 29, 2021](#), the OPM director issued guidance, which authorized an additional extension for the full implementation of the E.O. until December 31, 2022. On [May 19, 2022](#), the OPM director issued new guidance, which emphasized the Biden Administration's continued interest in implementing the E.O. OPM has also issued “[Qualifications, Assessment, and Hiring Policy Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#),” which provides additional information related to E.O. 13932.

Issues for Congress

Congress has considered legislation to provide statutory authorization for the provisions of E.O. 13932 or otherwise alter the federal hiring process as it relates to education requirements. For example, on January 24, 2023, the Chance to Compete Act of 2023 (H.R. 159) passed the House and was later referred to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

Congress may wish to monitor the implementation of E.O. 13932 and any related legislative proposals. OPM has issued two deadline extensions to give agencies time to complete the requirements of the E.O. The most recent deadline has passed, and the results of agencies implementing the E.O. remain to be seen. The process established by the E.O. appears to be time consuming, and Congress may wish to consider whether agencies have the necessary resources to implement the E.O.'s stated provisions.

Congress may also wish to consider the effects of any related legislative proposals and of the E.O. on statutory [merit system principles](#). For example, removing minimum education requirements may allow for more subjectivity in the assessment of candidates, which could lead to favoritism in the hiring process.

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