



## **Don't overlook the unique skills of first-generation professionals**

By Julie Davidson, **cyberFEDS®** Editorial Director

**IN FOCUS:** Traditional assessment methods may overlook first-generation professionals when identifying the best and brightest candidates for a position, but FGPs often bring top skills to the table, according to Gregory White, a data analyst in the Commerce Department's Office of Human Capital Strategy and Diversity.

Research, he said, shows that the top five employable skills are:

- 1) Flexibility and agility.
- 2) Critical thinking/prioritization.
- 3) Interpersonal skills.
- 4) Communication.
- 5) Critical analysis.

Most FGPs have had to use these critical skills as they navigated their way through uncharted waters and became the first in their families to go to college and enter the professional world, White said during the Commerce Department's inaugural First Generation Professionals 2019 Summit.

The summit was the first of its kind and part of an initiative by the Department of Commerce to promote socioeconomic diversity in the federal government and eliminate barriers to help first-generation professionals reach their full potential.

"Today we officially started the conversation and I am asking you to continue that conversation," said Tinisha Agramonte, director of Commerce's Office of Civil Rights, "We need to raise awareness of how social class markers and indicators may prevent the full and fair consideration of FGPs."

Throughout the summit, FGPs, including U.S. Treasurer Jovita Carraza, shared their inspiring stories of becoming trailblazers into the professional world, many overcoming language and cultural barriers.

While their individual circumstances were different, they all faced some similar challenges.

### **Politics and unwritten rules**

Rukayatu "Ruky" Tijani, founder of the First Generation Purpose Project, said FGPs may have trouble navigating politics and unwritten rules and may need some additional "tools to grapple with their significantly changing identity."

She talked about her experience growing up in the projects in Bronx, N.Y., and then working for a top 20 law firm and as a U.S. attorney.

"By all accounts, at the very least from the outside looking in, I had clawed my way to success ... but inside I felt like I didn't belong ... a sentiment I now know is common among first generation professionals," she said. "I was the first in my family to navigate such a space of privilege and prestige, and ... there was a sea of isolation between the world I was currently navigating and the world I was still from."

To help her adjust, Tijani said she enlisted the help of mentors and tutors, focused on mental health and self-care, and sought out both career and financial counseling. She ultimately started the First Generation Purpose Project to help other first-generation "rock stars ... understand that by investing in themselves they are actually building a purpose that allows everyone around them to benefit."

Even though FGPs often have nontraditional backgrounds, they all have a keen understanding of the population their agencies serve and have "superpowers" such as grit, tenacity, resilience, and determination, Agramonte said.

"If [FGPs] are not part of our workforce and we don't have that representation of the diverse socioeconomic spectrum that exists in America ... we will impede our ability to deliver products and services that benefit all Americans," Agramonte said. "We believe that humble beginnings and life circumstances should not prevent anyone from going as far as their talents will take them."

## **What's next**

Moving forward, Agramonte said, Commerce will take some concrete actions to advance the FGP initiative, including:

- Building a strong network of FGPs and allies. "I want to go big or go home," she said, which means having an FGP employee resource group chapter in every federal agency.
- Providing information and resources and future workshop and seminars. The Securities and Exchange Commission will partner with the Commerce Department's Office of Civil Rights to officially kick off the FGP series with a workshop on Oct. 10.

"There are so many different pathways to the professional workforce," Agramonte said. "So, we need to shift the paradigm and expand the perception and perspective of who is the best and brightest ... because the best and brightest have diverse pathways and come in many different packages."