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## *Nancy Potok, PhD*

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**N**ancy Potok, PhD, is currently the Chief Statistician of the United States and the Chief of Statistical and Science Policy at the US Office of Management and Budget. She previously served as the Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer of the US Census Bureau from 2012 to 2017. Her career spans more than 30 years of leadership in the public, non-profit, and private sectors. Dr. Potok has also been an adjunct professor at the Trachtenberg School since 2011. She received her BA from Sonoma State University, her MPA from the University of Alabama, and her PhD in public policy and administration from the Trachtenberg School.

**Policy Perspectives: You currently hold the position of Chief Statistician of the United States. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that job entails?**

**Nancy Potok:** There has always been someone in the position of the Chief Statistician—or a similar position like an Associate Director for Statistics—since the 1930s, when the federal government really started to pay a lot of attention to statistics and data. Federal statistics were one of the primary sources of information, and the Chief Statistician was the person who really made sure that the statistics were going to be objective, accurate, timely, relevant, all of those things. Over time, the position actually was enshrined in statute in the Paperwork Reduction Act, which really emphasized information quality and how important it was to have objective and relevant and timely information. The job was assigned to OMB [Office of Management and Budget], and one of the amendments to the Paperwork Reduction Act created the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, and the Chief Statistician was in that office. So in addition to assuring the quality of the federal statistical data, the Chief Statistician coordinates the designated statistical agencies, of which there are thirteen. They also set policy and guidance for all statistical units in the US government. I issue statistical directives that talk about the quality of the data, protecting it from political influence, and how to issue principal economic indicators. I head up the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy as well as lead the US delegation to the UN on statistical matters, and so I am the official representative to the UN Statistical Commission. It's a policy coordinating role that's all geared around international cooperation and making sure that we have high-quality federal data.

**PP: Our understanding is that the US Federal Statistical System is very decentralized, and that makes the US somewhat of an outlier. There are lots of other countries that have just one agency conducting all statistics at the federal level. Do you think that that's something that the US should move towards? Would you like to see just one statistical agency, or are there certain advantages to having it more spread out throughout the federal government?**

**NP:** I think there's different models internationally, from completely centralized to decentralized and then there's the hybrid model in between, and I think the hybrid model would work very well in the US. The hybrid model is when you combine agencies that are collecting general statistics. The kinds of things that BLS [Bureau of Labor Statistics] does, the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and industry sectors like agriculture that really have to do with demographic and economic information. In the UK that's all centralized, in Canada that's all centralized. Then what you find is there are these embedded, very specialized statistical units in agencies that might specialize just in health statistics or education statistics or justice statistics. And there it is very helpful to take out the decentralized statistical functions because you need a lot of subject matter expertise to really understand the data. And we have both of those, but they're all decentralized, so the Bureau of Justice Statistics is very small, Economic Research Service is very small, National Center for Education Statistics gets a lot of money that they give out but the staffing is very small. So I think there's room for both, but it's much more efficient to centralize these general statistics, and in most countries their Chief Statistician in charge of the centralized piece of this and actually runs that agency.

**PP: So what do you see are some of the big challenges or opportunities facing the US Federal Statistical System right now? Are there major gaps in the data that you see where you wish you had more data or better data?**

**NP:** Well you always want more and better data. There's never enough data. But I think probably

the big challenge reflects the changes in data science and information gathering. The Federal Statistical System really perfected 20th century methods for gathering and disseminating information. What we are facing now is rapid changes in the way information is gathered, in its availability, and how it's processed with machine learning, artificial intelligence, things like that. You gather statistics to help you make decisions, and there's a lot out there now in the world that affects decision-making. So the challenge for federal statistics is really to adapt to the needs of the data research. Unfortunately, while there's a lot of information out there, not all of it is good, and so people still rely on federal statistics very commonly because there is kind of a quality guarantee with that, there's consistency, and you can do longitudinal studies because it doesn't change a lot in terms of methods from earlier. Whereas if you're just going to go out on the internet and look for open data, you're not sure of what the quality is. And so the challenge I think for the federal statistical system is to start to adapt more quickly, because methods are being adopted, but not fast, or fast enough, I think, to keep up with the way technology is changing in the world. Federal statisticians are normally pretty cautious, because they don't want changes in their data series, suddenly, that just throws everything off. I think the challenge is looking at alternative sources of data and still being able to measure and maintain quality. A lot of what I've been doing lately is being the champion for encouraging the statistical agencies to move faster and to really feel a sense of urgency about doing this, and to put together a research agenda for the federal government, to say what are the types of research we want to push and encourage, and encourage our partners in academia and in the private sector to do more doing and sharing. And then in my role, can I start to put together some kind of standards that address the quality, because we have a lot of standards and guidance out there that address survey quality, but nothing out there that addresses information quality when you're combining data from multiple sources. So that's very high on my priority list.

**PP: Before you were the Chief Statistician, you'd spent the bulk of your career in the federal government, mostly with the US Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget. What drew you to a career in public service?**

**NP:** When I was in undergraduate school, I knew that I wanted to go into public service before I even went to graduate school, because I was not at all interested in simply going to work every day to make money. I really wanted to change the world in a positive way, and I felt the way to do that was through public service. My undergraduate degree was actually in environmental studies, and it was out in California and I worked for the California Water Quality Control Board in an intern position while I was going to school. I was hoping to get a permanent job out in California on water quality. But I got laid off from that job when I graduated. They couldn't hire me permanently because California had had a big property tax cut, and all the state agencies were getting cut. So I decided to look at the federal level. I got a federal job, which I didn't really like, so I went back to graduate school to get an MPA, and the MPA really opened a lot of doors in public service for me because I got into the Presidential Management Fellow program upon graduation. I moved to DC and that just changed everything. That was a really wonderful experience, because I was hired by the Department of Transportation. It was actually a position in the FAA environmental office. I got to work on the transportation appropriations subcommittee on a rotation, and I did another rotation in the Office of the Secretary in the budget and program office. So I got exposed to a lot of things, and after the two-year internship, I ended up getting hired at the transportation branch at OMB and worked there for seven years. I would say working in OMB is a really good place to sort of get a perspective of the whole

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federal government. Then I left the executive branch and worked for the administrative office of the US courts, and that was really interesting working in the judicial branch of government. It was completely, completely different from working in the executive branch. But I got to do really interesting and exciting things and still felt like I was making a contribution to the betterment of the country there. Then I wanted to get back to the executive branch, I wanted to make a change. So that was when I ended up at the Census Bureau. Honestly, that was my first exposure to the Federal Statistical System. It's odd being the Chief Statistician now. I did not come up through a statistical background at all, it was much more of the MPA generalist background. But I found that the skills that I had learned by being a generalist were applicable no matter what the topic was. It was more of an advantage in some ways to have the generalist skills that you get with an MPA and with a program like the PMF program than a narrow focus on a single subject. I loved working at the Census Bureau. But I was there for the 2000 Census, and I just got burned out at that point. It had been very intense. And during that period, I had two kids and I actually was very fortunate to have very supportive bosses in an era where not all bosses were supportive of women having children. I worked part-time for eight years. It was great, but when I went to Census it was full-time, and I worked there for about seven years during the 2000 census and I just needed a break. By that time, I had gotten into an SES [Senior Executive Service] position, and if you're in the SES, you can take advantage of the Intergovernmental Personnel Act which allows you to go on rotational assignments to nonprofits and universities. I went to NORC at the University of Chicago, which is a nonprofit social science research company that does surveys, studies, and policy research for professors at the University of Chicago but also on behalf of many federal agencies. I did this IPA assignment for a year and a half and liked it so much that I left the federal government permanently and took a full-time job at NORC as a Senior Vice President there. At the same time, and don't ask me why I did this, but I decided to go back to school and get my PhD.

**PP: That was going to be our next question! Because you worked for a bit, then got your MPA, then were back in the workforce for over two decades, so then why did you decide to go back for the PhD?**

**NP:** There were two reasons. One was I wanted to make that change at that point from being completely a generalist to working more programmatically. Because my career up till now had really been in budget and on the management and infrastructure side, and I wanted to work on the program side. When I got to NORC, which was social science research, I really wanted to enhance my skills in the social sciences and get a PhD, and just do a deeper dive into this subject matter and the methods for doing social science research as opposed to managing social science research. So it seemed like a good time to go get a PhD. Also, I've always liked school, and I'd been out of school for a long time, and I thought it might be kind of fun to go back to school. And my son, that year that I applied to GW, was applying for college, and I was watching him do all the applications, and I just sort of got this hankering to go back to school. I loved the structure of the GW program because it was in DC, so I didn't have to leave the area to go to school there. I could do the whole program in night school, so I didn't have to stop working, and it was so well-connected to my own experience having been in DC, having worked in the public sector, and in nonprofits. It just seemed like such a great fit, and I loved the program, I really enjoyed it. Oddly, my dissertation topic was something I had gotten interested in when I worked at Census. Over the course of working on the PhD, I had left NORC and gone to work for a consulting company in DC, because it was very hard for me to go back and forth

to Chicago all the time where the company was located, and be in school, and have a family and do all of those things. I got a job in the DC area with a consulting company, just thinking, okay, I'm going to do this dissertation. I ended up within a year and half of moving to this new company being the COO of the company. But what I found was that I didn't think I was ever going to go back into public service again, because I really liked running this consulting company. I found that if you're consulting on things that affect public policy, that can be just as good as, and sometimes better than, working in the government, because you don't have all the red tape and the bureaucracy. So I didn't really think I was going to go back to government. But I was really interested in my dissertation topic, which was what are some of the barriers that exist in the federal space to linking survey data and administrative records? There's a lot of legal and cultural barriers. I did my dissertation on how to identify and address those and what they could mean for data in the future. And it was really just based on my experiences at Census and working at NORC, but I didn't think I was going to apply it to anything. So it was really interesting to me when I did end up coming back to government that that has been sort of a really high priority, addressing all the things that I covered in my dissertation.

**PP: Do you ever see yourself leaving the federal government for another sector for good?**

**NP:** Definitely.

**PP: Really?**

**NP:** Yeah. I went back to the federal government in 2009, but it wasn't anything that I had intended or planned to do. When I got back to the federal government, the Obama administration had come into office in 2009, and the 2010 census was right on the horizon. And the Census Bureau during the previous decade had, after I'd left, had a lot of problems in terms of getting ready for the 2010 census. So when the new administration came in, they were really worried that the census was going to fail. It probably wasn't going to fail, but the new administration was all nervous about it. And so the new Secretary of Commerce brought in a new undersecretary for economic affairs whose role was to not only advise on the economy, but to oversee the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. She called me up and asked me to come in and talk, and I thought she wanted to talk to me about consulting. She basically said look, it was a recession, it was 2009, and she really had to focus on how the economy was doing and all the economic things, and she had never been around for a census. She said would you come in and be a deputy undersecretary and help us get through the census. So even though it wasn't my plan to come back to government, and I was really enjoying running this consulting company, duty called. When you're asked to come in and help on something as important as the census, which is in the Constitution as the fundamental basis of our democracy in terms of allocating Congressional seats in the states, and they're worried that this isn't going to go very well, you have to help.

**PP: It's hard to turn that down.**

**NP:** Yeah. So I figured this will just be the rest of 2009, 2010, and then in 2011 I can go back to my company. I took a leave of absence from my company, but I got so engaged again with what I was doing, and it was just so fulfilling, that here I am still in 2018, ten years later almost. I intended to go for like two and a half to three years. So yes, I would consider doing something else.

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**PP: You've got to keep it interesting.**

**NP:** But I think it was actually really good, I mean, I've had a very interesting career that has kept me motivated, because I have had at least some experience in all three branches of government. I only worked a short time on appropriations on the Hill, but it still was a good insider view of that. And I've worked for a nonprofit and I've worked for a for-profit, so I don't regret anything. There's lots of alternate paths that people can take. Mine's a little wind-y, but ultimately it's been very satisfying. And I do feel like I've worked on things that have been important, that have made a difference. Not everything, and what you'll see if you're around long enough is that things you work on in one administration get reversed in the next administration. But then it comes back again, so what was interesting to me when I moved last January back to OMB, aside from the fact that oddly, I was in almost the exact same office that I had been in so many years before, which is like kind of strange. I was like, how did I end up on the same floor, same side of the building...

**PP: Everything comes back around.**

**NP:** Yeah! But what I noticed was that the issues came back around. So there were things that came up as the 2018 budget was being put together that I had dealt with back when I was working on budgets in my first round at OMB, which was like 30 years earlier. The same issues were coming around that still hadn't been resolved. It was not a great moment, I would say, in terms of looking at how things progress in the federal government, that the same issues come up over and over again and never get resolved. On the other hand, I can see a lot of things that actually get changed over time. Sometimes you just have to take that view of, if you go forward with 100 things and ten of them actually stick, and then there's ten more that are progressing, it may feel like two steps forward, one step back, but over time the trend is in the right direction. You really have to keep that perspective. The country's changing significantly, and it continues to change. But ultimately people are headed in a forward direction.

**PP: It's nice that you can maintain that optimistic point of view about government and the country and the way that different policy things move forward.**

**NP:** And technology has really accelerated the pace of change. 100 years ago, the pace of change was glacial, and now it's so rapid. But unintentionally I find myself in the middle of some of the key issues of our time as far as information quality. There's so much information out there, and so much bad information, that I feel like it is really important to be in a position where at least you can do something about the quality of information that comes from the federal government, and try to assure that quality so people at least know there is a source that they can go to that you can count on.

**PP: So you're in a unique position in that you're both an alumna of the Trachtenberg School and you now teach at the Trachtenberg School as well. How do you think the Trachtenberg School has changed or evolved over time, from maybe when you were there to now when you're teaching?**

**NP:** I did graduate in 2009, so it's not like how has it changed since 1980 or 1990. I think this school has changed in some ways with more stuff available online and things like that. But I really think the field has changed, and so what I'm trying to do in my classes is really to push for more engagement between people who are interested in policy and management, both the MPPs and MPAs, and the data scientists in solving problems. Because there's a sea change in

the way people are making decisions and solving problems. And I really think the Trachtenberg School could play a big role in helping people, particularly in the MPA and MPP program, get really adept at using data to solve some of these big problems and to inform how policy is considered. If you're looking at how do we address homelessness, for example, it's good if you can follow people over time. You can understand more about them, you can start to say, well, here's where we should focus our effort, and these are the things, these are the interventions that really make a difference. So I think being able to link data from multiple sources to really address these questions is where the Trachtenberg School should be focusing. You need the theoretical framework, but you also need to understand the field, and understand all these tools that are available now to solve these problems. And many of them are data and technology and figuring out what's available to answer the questions. I think the school is moving in that direction, so I'd like to see more partnerships with the data science side, and also with cities and other governmental units that are really trying to solve problems. When I take the students and put them to work with the data scientists and the people who are trying to manage these programs, they can start to find the answers. I think that will be an incredible experience, and I'd love to see more of an opportunity to get into these lab environments.

**PP: Our last question to you would be, especially because you teach Introduction to Public Policy and Public Administration, what are the one or two concepts or skills or pieces of advice that you try to instill in your students, and that you think are most valuable to them?**

**NP:** I think it's one, to never stop learning, because the world is changing pretty rapidly, and two, to really understand yourself so that whatever situation you're in, you are developing your emotional intelligence to be successful in whatever you are choosing to do. Because what you choose to do isn't, in a way, as important as how you feel about it and your effectiveness at it. People sometimes concentrate a lot on building the hard skills, and they neglect the soft skills. Relationships and how you're interacting with people are really important. I think it's actually more important than some of the concepts I teach. So that's one of the things I really like about the Trachtenberg program with the MPAs and the MPPs starting out with a lot of working in teams, doing the Myers-Briggs, and really thinking about how people interact in the workplace. We do a lot of that in the introductory class.

**PP: Those things are definitely important because if you don't know yourself, then you can't interact with people in a way that's effective. And you may never get a chance to actually show those other skills you have.**

**NP:** One of the things I thought was really helpful about starting out in the PMF program when I got to the workplace was at that time, there was a huge amount of training. So we took Myers-Briggs, we went to leadership training, we did a lot that really built up those soft skills. And that was like right out of the starting gate on our careers. That always was so valuable to me, going through my career, having those kinds of insights early on. I think especially for people who are early in their careers, getting the MPA or the MPP, focusing on that is very important, because you may or may not actually get that at work.