



Melanie R. Thornton

Communication is Key to Success

My interest in earth science began at a young age, as family trips involved visiting national parks and appreciating conservation efforts. Yet I can't deny my passion for being outside and in nature may have been the subtle influence that sparked joy in wanting to learn more about the natural environment. I recognize how my early experiences affected my understanding of our responsibilities toward a sustainable future. Realizing that I could influence natural resource policies needed in our communities, I felt compelled to shape science advocacy. I knew that working in Washington, D.C., would provide first-hand experience about policy making at the federal level. The dream I had of becoming a fellow seemed to be a necessary step after completing my academics, since I wanted a chance to learn how I might impact a changing world through legislation.

As the 2017–2018 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, I arrived in Washington, D.C., in August 2017 just a few months after receiving my doctorate and ready for orientation and placement. I am one of 35 Science Policy Congressional Fellows in a program organized and run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In addition to GSA, other scientific and engineering professional associations support Ph.D. scientists as fellows to work on the Hill. I serve my fellowship in the Office of Senator Tom Udall (D-NM), where I'm engaged in policies and issues related to water, natural resources, biofuels, fisheries, and science. The access to research, collaborative decision making, and stakeholder engagement has increased my appreciation for the political process. Thus far, this year-long fellowship has provided ample experience to communicate complex scientific issues and policies, understand the inner workings of Congress, and learn the importance of relationships and collaboration.

It did not take long for me to realize that success as a congressional staffer is driven by effective communication. When I first started as a fellow, I was amazed at the ability of congressional staffers to quickly digest, distill, and clearly communicate complex policy issues to colleagues, constituents, and particularly to the member of Congress. A common exercise for a new congressional fellow is to summarize a broad scientific policy topic into one page or less. I was tasked with drafting a memo to summarize the Renewable Fuel Standard, a complicated biofuels policy with so much jargon it would make your head spin. I started by summarizing the policy to two pages, then distilled it further to one page, cut it down to a paragraph, and ultimately ended with a few bulleted sentences. Oftentimes congressional staffers will be lucky to get the member of Congress to read the first paragraph of a memo, given the demands of their schedule, therefore it is important to be straightforward, concise, and relevant in all forms of communication.

The pace of work and the interactions with colleagues and stakeholders are quite different from an academic environment. My most notable experience thus far was having to write Senator Udall a vote recommendation memo for a bill in under two hours. Senator Udall is a member of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, and must be well-prepared for executive session. Since a number of bills and nominations are voted on, members of his staff research, review, and compile draft vote recommendations into a staff memo prior to the committee meeting. There was a controversial ocean fisheries bill on the agenda of one particular meeting, and since this agenda item was added at the last minute, I did not have ample time to complete this task. I quickly conferred with ocean policy experts, Committee staff, and ocean fisheries stakeholders. I grasped as much as I could about ocean fisheries policy, including the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act so that I could adequately inform the Senator. Ultimately, I learned that picking up the telephone is much faster than researching a topic solo. This experience illuminated the importance of communication and that synthesizing information quickly and succinctly is a requirement in working as a legislative staffer on the Hill.

As I reflect on the experience halfway through the GSA-USGS fellowship, I think of the number of benefits that this fellowship has provided. I have had a front row seat in shaping science policy, learning from many experienced congressional staffers and serving the public and geoscience community. My congressional science fellowship has broadened my worldview, deepened my understanding of how public policy works, and changed my perceptions of science and environmental advocacy. I have learned the importance of strengthening and fine-tuning my own communication and scientific policy writing skills. Regardless of the level of education and knowledge a person holds, the ability to communicate well can provide advantages in careers and experiences going forward.

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