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Hill Essentials for Science Policy: Data, Communication, Relationships, and Kindness

After spending the past year working in the office of Senator Tom Udall (D-NM), my fellowship has come to an end. I am making the transition from Capitol Hill to the environmental non-governmental organization community, taking a position at Defenders of Wildlife as a senior government relations representative. I want to share my personal perspective of what I have learned during my time as a Congressional Science Fellow on Capitol Hill. Here are a few of my takeaways.

Science, Facts, and Data Matter

In an era where “fake news” and “alternative facts” are common, I was comforted by the fact that science and evidence are used by congressional staff when developing policy, analyzing legislation, and advising members of Congress. As a congressional fellow, I have had direct experience working with scientists to understand the impacts on the ground of the recently introduced bill, the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act (S. 3715). During the process of drafting and analyzing the legislation, congressional staff made legislative recommendations that were informed by data and other scientific information. It is important to remember when providing research and scientific material to congressional staff to be clear and concise. I also learned that while many congressional staff may not be trained scientists, they certainly have a capacity for scientific tenacity.

Get to the Point, and Quickly

Time is an extremely valuable and very limited resource on the Hill. As a staffer, being an effective communicator is, I would argue, the most important part of the job. I quickly learned and got a lot of practice distilling complex scientific issues into one simple paragraph. And sometimes it would require further refinement to just one sentence. This was also applicable to verbal communication, and since time is limited, conveying key takeaways in a short (30 seconds or fewer) elevator speech is an essential skill. As a scientist, my trick was using what I call the “grandparent check”—I often asked myself, “Would my grandparents understand this information?” We live in a communication age, and it is important that we spend the time necessary to develop and refine these skills.

Relationships and Collaboration Make a Difference

The old adage, “It’s not what you know, but who you know,” especially runs true on the Hill. Effective legislative staffers know the importance of building and maintaining relationships with key staff, stakeholders, and constituents. These relationships provide fertile ground for building strong congressional partnerships and working across the aisle. Under the direction of the member of Congress, it often comes down to congressional staff working together to craft legislation with common-sense solutions. I am a firm believer that a collaborative and cooperative staff is fundamental to bipartisanship and getting legislation and initiatives across the finish line.

Be Kind, Always

To many, walking around the “Capitol Complex,” a group of about a dozen buildings and facilities used primarily by the legislative branch of the federal government, may seem daunting. You never know whose path you are going to cross. You could be riding a subway car with a member of Congress or walking the halls with cabinet-level officials. An intern may work his or her way up to become a legislative director or political appointee. These examples demonstrate the value of being kind. And it is an important reminder that especially rings true on Capitol Hill. It is a small world after all.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Melanie R. Thornton, 2017–2018 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award Number G16AP00179. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Thornton has concluded her fellowship in the office of Senator Tom Udall (D-NM), and will be working at Defenders of Wildlife, as a senior government relations representative, and can be contacted by e-mail at thorntonmelanie4@gmail.com or mthornton@defenders.org.