Congressional fellowship program bridges the gap between science and policy

In September 1998, Laura Lyman Rodriguez began her tenure as the 1998–1999 American Institute of Biological Sciences and American Society of Limnology and Oceanography Congressional Fellow. A cell biologist by training, Rodriguez says that her interests in public policy began when “I recognized that my primary concern rested in the far-reaching and often elusive benefits and consequences of the technology I was using.” But, she says, “I did not grow up loving science.” It took one dynamic teacher to change her concept of science from “dead frogs” to the “complex expression of cells, proteins, and genes which interacted to create the solid vision that I saw.”

Rodriguez nurtured this concept in others as a teaching assistant, both in college at Washington and Lee University, in Lexington, Virginia, and in graduate school at Baylor College of Medicine, in Houston, Texas. By the time she received her Ph.D. from Baylor in 1996, she had developed a strong appreciation for the role that educating the public and policymakers play in securing support for basic research and an understanding that the benefits of basic research must be stressed to legislators “in such a way that it is abundantly apparent why their support is in the public interest.”

Soon after graduating, Rodriguez obtained the position of Administrative Director at Baylor Institute for Immunology Research. Her responsibilities in that role complemented her laboratory experience with administrative skills and heightened her interest in policy communication.

For Rodriguez, the next logical step was to pursue a congressional fellowship. She says that, ultimately, “effective communication and cooperation among government entities, basic research scientists, clinicians, and educators will form the basis for effective policy development and implementation.” Her goal? To become fluent with the language and workings of the policy community, in addition to those of the science community, so that she can help bridge the gaps that inevitably arise between groups with diverse agendas.

Rodriguez’s new colleagues on Capitol Hill will waste no time in creating that fluency. According to past congressional fellows, science fellows instantly become multidisciplinary experts in biology, engineering, chemistry, physics, and psychology, regardless of their actual scientific training. The fellows undergo a broad two-week orientation session in September that includes briefings from representatives and senators and overviews of Congress, the Executive Branch, the Department of Defense, the National Research Council, and science and public policy relations.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) administers the program through which AIBS and its cosponsoring member societies offer the congressional fellowship. Congressional fellows spend one year working on the staffs of members of Congress or congressional committees as special assistants in legislative areas requiring scientific and technical input. Fellows make significant public service contributions through the program, but they also learn by being involved in a wide array of legislative, oversight, and investigative activities.

The response to the program from Congress is overwhelmingly positive. Each July, AAAS contacts congressional offices to solicit their interest in placing a fellow; by August, enthusiastic responses arrive from two to three times as many offices as there are fellows available. Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) has said of the program: “As the Congress is increasingly involved in public policy issues of a scientific and technical nature...it becomes increasingly more important that the scientific and engineering communities become aware of the workings of government in these areas, and that better liaison be developed in the public interest. The congressional science and engineering fellowships are well designed to accomplish these purposes, to the mutual benefit of all concerned.”

Since the program’s inception in 1973, nearly 700 scientists have served as Congressional Science and Engineering Fellows. At the conclusion of their fellowships, approximately one-third of the fellows return to their previous positions, one-third go on to new positions in different settings, and one-third continue working in the policy arena in Washington or elsewhere; of this last group, some have assumed senior positions in Congress and the Executive Branch.

Rodriguez hopes to join her predecessors in the policy arena. “I see myself in the role of facilitator,” she says. She plans to maintain her involvement in the research community but anticipates making a significant impact “in the communication vein—talking to the public, policymakers, and scientists, and helping them talk among themselves.”

In addition to the congressional fellowships such as that sponsored by AIBS, the AAAS Science and Engineering Fellowship Program offers fellowships in the Departments of State, Agriculture, and Defense; the US Agency for International Development; the US Environmental Protection Agency; the US Food and Drug Administration; and RAND Critical Technologies Institute. Mass media fellowships (designed for graduate students) and global stewardship fellowships are also offered.

The fellowship program includes the two-week orientation session, placement and support services, and a year-long seminar series. Applicants...
must have received their Ph.D. at the time of application. Term lengths, stipends, and management arrangements vary per fellowship and sponsoring society. Visit www.aaas.org/spp/dspf/ stg/cover.htm or call 202/326-6600 for more information about the AAAS Science and Engineering Fellowship Program. For information about the AIBS Congressional Science Fellowship Program, call 202/628-1500, extension 253; or e-mail jkolber@aibs.org.

—Jodi F. Kolber

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