

Bonus episode: We saw a lot of that scientific sage savior syndrome

The following is the script for a recorded panel discussion among AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellows from 2019. We have edited the audio for length and clarity.

Kerri Jansen: Hi, everyone. This is Kerri Jansen, and we've got a new bonus episode for you with a very special guest, C&EN policy reporter Andrea Widener. Andrea, thanks for joining us.

Andrea Widener: Thanks, Kerri.

Kerri: So in these bonus episodes, we get to lift the curtain a little bit and take listeners behind the scenes with our reporters, to hear more of what we hear. So what will we be hearing today?

Andrea: I'm excited to introduce our listeners to six chemists I've been talking to for a year. They've been living and working in the US capital to learn more about government and science policy.

Kerri: You've been following their stories for a year. This was part of the American Association for the Advancement of Science policy fellowships program, right?

Andrea: Right. It's like a postdoc in science policy.

AAAS runs a well-respected fellowship program that lets scientists get a feel for what it's like working in government, especially in Congress or the executive branch. Since the fellowship started in the 1970s, it has brought more than 3,000 scientists to Washington, DC. And its alumni are spread throughout the government and beyond.

Kerri: It sounds like a great opportunity. And something you could write an entire cover story about.

Andrea: Funny you should mention that. I actually wrote that cover story a few weeks ago. And we'll put a link to it in this episode's description. I thought our *Stereo Chemistry* listeners might like to learn more about how the fellowship works and what advice the fellows would give to other chemists who are interested.

Kerri: And to do that, we brought all six chemists into C&EN's offices for a roundtable discussion about their experiences. Andrea and I were there to ask questions when we had them, but for the most part, we just let the fellows talk. And that's what we're going to share with you now. Andrea, where should we jump in?

Andrea: Let's start by talking about how AAAS policy fellows get selected. It's an almost-yearlong process, starting with an application, including writing assignments, and interviews. The fellows who want to work in the executive branch, which does the day-to-day work of government, then come to DC in the spring for a whirlwind of talks with agencies. The fellows all come in with some kind of idea of where they might want to work, but the different offices also have some idea of the kind of people they are interested in.

The first chemist you'll hear is Joelle Labastide. During her fellowship, she worked at the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an independent government agency that focuses on reducing global poverty.

Joelle Labastide: It was just a matter of going on as many interviews as you could realistically fit into a week and trying to find the best match for your skill set, your interests, and the agency. And I actually ended up in an agency that I had never even heard of before interview week. They requested an interview from me, and my first question was, "What do you do here, and what do you want with me?" But that was a really incredible opportunity to actually see something, a completely different side of the government that I didn't even know I was looking for, and it turned out to be exactly what I wanted. So yeah, it was a very exhausting week, but worth it.

Margaret Lentz: It gives you a good sense of what each branch is doing and what you may or may not want to ever do in your future. That interview process, as intensive as it is, really helps you sort out things that you might like and that you never even knew existed.

Kerri: That second voice you heard was Margaret Lentz, who worked at the DOE, the Department of Energy.

Margaret Lentz: I realized how important the mentor-mentee relationship is and finding a good match that you feel you click with in that interview. Because it really does set the tone for the rest of the year. If you have a great mentorship relationship, it helps you figure out where you go next, and it gives you more opportunities to do things.

Joelle Labastide: It was actually really just interesting to see myself through the eyes of a bunch of different potential career paths that maybe I hadn't thought about how my experience would project directly onto that path. And so it was sort of a crash course in, like, "What do you look like on paper?" Which, I mean, I'm really grateful for. I feel like there are not many opportunities that you get to do that.

Margaret Lentz: The way people view you based on whatever the last thing is on your résumé. That surprised me sometimes too.

Joelle Labastide: It was also really interesting to see the different parts of your CV that different offices responded to that you wouldn't have thought of. So that was definitely, like, even if we only got to do interview week, I think that that was, like, a mind-set changer for approaching a career or the future.

Andrea: Fellows who work in Congress, which makes US laws, find their position a little differently. Their matching happens after they have already moved to Washington and gone through orientation.

Kerri: So they move to Washington without knowing what job they'll be doing?

Andrea: Yes, it's a bit of a leap of faith. Let's hear from Drew Story and Teresa Williams. Drew worked in Senator Chris Coons's office. And Teresa was a fellow in the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Drew Story: I would say for Teresa and I as the congressional fellows sponsored by ACS that our placement process was similar in a lot of ways to the executive branch but on a different timeline.

Andrea: The American Chemical Society, or ACS, sponsored both Drew and Teresa's fellowships. ACS also publishes C&EN. Here's Drew again.

Drew Story: We both showed up in September and had a weekend to scroll through our stack of offices that were interested in hosting fellows and then, similarly, schedule as many interviews as you could handle in a week, 3 days, really. And just try to find an office that you fit in with the culture, that the portfolio matched what you wanted to work on.

Teresa Williams: I think the most interesting part of that congressional fellowship placement week is the first night, the Monday night, we have what's called Prom Night. Or I sort of call it speed dating for scientists. All of us are in a room together, the 32 congressional fellows, and then representatives from the committees or personal offices show up, and they're literally walking around with your face on a piece of paper trying to find you. And you're meeting as many people as possible and exchanging business cards and setting up dates or interviews for the very next day. They literally bring their schedules, and it's like a feeding frenzy, and I'm so glad that I never have to do it again.

Kerri: Yikes. That sounds stressful.

Andrea: I think the fellows would agree. But they learned a lot just from the interviews.

Kerri: And we heard that the fellowship ended up being a great learning experience in general. The fellows mentioned having an increased awareness that it takes more than facts and data to make policy.

Andrea: Yeah. One of the points that stood out was that the fellowship forces scientists to think about how their perspectives aligned with or differed from those of the other people involved in government. Of course, that means politicians and government officials, but also voters. Here's Danielle Lohman, who worked in the State Department's Office of the Biological Policy.

Danielle Lohman: They expect that we're coming from the ivory tower or maybe industry, where we're told that people don't understand science just because they don't know anything about it. So we give them a bunch of facts and we expect that to make a difference. I think AAAS did a really fantastic job at the orientation and kind of breaking that illusion and then telling us to pay attention to other things, like the politics, like the timing, like who's saying what in the room. There's a design to it, and if you know the game, then you can play it.

Andrea (in interview): Did you have to try to convince people that they needed a scientist? Or did everyone in the office, was willing to take your perspective and advice?

Monique Pond: So pretty much everybody in our office has a technical background. Most people have some sort of an advanced degree in science or engineering, as well as some sort of experience in industry or business development or an MBA or something of that nature. So it wasn't a challenge for me stepping into an office environment like that.

Andrea (in studio): That's Monique Pond, who worked at the National Cancer Institute in a department that helps commercialize federally funded research.

Teresa and Danielle also responded to my question. You'll hear Teresa first. Her office had oversight over DOE as well as the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Teresa Williams: There was, there was no convincing needed. Working on a committee where we had oversight over DOE and EPA and we're working on climate change and environmental health and toxic chemicals—I fit in.

Danielle Lohman: Well, I almost think I had the opposite problem from what you said. So I work in an office called Biological Policy Staff, and yet I'm the only scientist. And so they think that I know all of the answers to everything science related.

[Laughter]

So a lot of times they're asking for my opinions and I don't yet have any on whatever the subject is.

Kerri (in interview): I've got a question.

Andrea (in interview): Yeah, go ahead.

Kerri: I would love to hear some stories that you can share them with specific projects that you were able to weigh in on. Does anyone have one that really stuck out in your mind? Either for good or bad reasons?

Teresa Williams: I wrote a bill that's on electrification of the transportation refrigeration units that keep cargo cold when food or medication is being delivered and transported.

Kerri (in studio): That's Teresa again.

Teresa Williams: So it's a bill that I had an idea, I did some research, found a member who is interested. So it's a pilot program and a grant to replace these diesel-powered transportation refrigeration units, which are called reefers in the industry.

[Laughter]

This is what happens, I talk about my reefers bill, everybody laughs.

Andrea (in studio): Teresa's reefers would definitely be better for the environment than standard diesel. We heard from Danielle next.

Danielle Lohman: I recently had the privilege to speak on behalf of the US government in Geneva at the Biological Weapons Convention, which is an international agreement to not use biological weapons. It was kind of intimidating to sit behind the US placard and address all the other delegates from other countries, and I felt like it was a privilege, and I think the little experience I had in presenting my dissertation and those other public speaking experiences, surprisingly, equipped me quite well, I think.

Kerri: Here's Margaret Lentz, who we heard from earlier in the episode. Remember, she was at the DOE, and she split her time between the Office of Science and the National Nuclear Security Administration, or NNSA, which oversees the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile.

Margaret Lentz: I got the opportunity to see a huge part of the NNSA complex that most people don't ever get to see. And because of my science background and because of the way that most physicists write and my background in rhetoric, I got to go through R&D portfolios throughout multiple labs and multiple sites and learn so much about the entire, the way everything works. That office came out of the Manhattan Project, so to be able to see it on that level and to integrate myself with the scientists, but then go back to the policy and legislative affairs side, I would say that was one of the more rewarding things.

Kerri: So I think we're nearing the end of the roundtable discussion. Are there any final thoughts we should leave our listeners with?

Andrea: I think I've got just the question. Drew and Danielle will kick us off with the answers.

Andrea (in interview): Is there anything else you wanted to mention about the fellowships? Or anything you think people should know if they're going to apply?

Drew Story: Just do it. Just apply.

Danielle Lohman: I think most people would be surprised at how well they're prepared to take on something like this. I found the experience so far validating. So I think if you're interested in it, give it a shot.

Kerri: Joelle had a chance to read over applications from incoming AAAS policy fellows, and she had some advice.

Joelle Labastide: Don't apply if you think that you are just, like, an epic genius who needs to come and save the government from its dysfunctional ways. You will be sorely disappointed that one, you're not an epic genius, and two, that the government is actually totally fine without you.

[Laughter]

And also, like, being privy to the process of evaluating the applications this last year, it doesn't go over that well with the people who will be hiring you. We saw a lot of that, like, scientific sage savior syndrome, and that's not what this is about. It's public service, and you need to understand also that it is an amazing learning opportunity for you and that you should come ready to learn something.

Kerri: And so, Andrea, if someone is interested in pursuing this sort of opportunity, where should they start?

Andrea (in studio): Well, Teresa and Margaret actually shared some tips that people who are interested in applying for the Science and Technology Policy Fellowship should take.

Teresa Williams: I would also say look on social media for the [AAAS STPF hashtag](#) because I met some really wonderful people on Twitter this year who were going through the application process, and it's sort of some informal mentoring, and I got to meet some of them at the American Chemical Society meeting in Orlando back in April. So that was a lot of fun getting to connect with folks and answering their questions, and it's a great way to start connecting with the fellows community, which is really strong and supportive and I'm very grateful for.

Margaret Lentz: When I was applying, I actually had a past fellow go over my application and that was, like, amazing information. And so I would suggest if somebody could do that for you, if you're interested, especially early on.

Teresa Williams: I think we would all pay that forward.

Kerri: If you're interested in learning more about the AAAS policy fellowship, we'll post some links in this bonus episode's description. Like the AAAS STPF hashtag on social media that Teresa

mentioned.

Andrea: And remember: the fellowship is open to scientists at all different stages of their careers. While some of our panelists were starting right out of grad school, others had worked for years before coming to Washington. Some academics even do the fellowship during their sabbatical.

Kerri: Well thank you, Andrea, for joining us for this bonus episode of *Stereo Chemistry*. You can follow Andrea on Twitter [@AWidenerCEN](#). And I'm [@absoluteKerri](#). Don't worry about the spelling—we'll link those in the show notes.

The music you heard today was “Stamp It Up” by Peter Spacey and “Runaway” by Veshza.

And this was the last of our initial installment of bonus episodes for 2020. Don't worry, though, we'll have more coming your way throughout the year, in addition to our regular full episodes every month. Be sure to subscribe to *Stereo Chemistry* wherever you get your podcasts to make sure you don't miss anything.

In the meantime, we want to know what you think of these shorter, behind-the-scenes stories. Please send your feedback on Twitter to @cenmag or email us at cen_multimedia@acs.org. We're excited to hear from you.

Andrea: And thanks for listening.