CAREER PROFILES Options and Insights

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Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I graduated from Boston University with a bachelor of arts degree in Earth sciences in 1999, then went on to earn a PhD in paleoclimate from the MIT/Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Joint Program in 2005.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

After receiving my PhD, I did a one-year postdoc at Scripps Institution of Oceanography through NOAA's Climate and Global Change Postdoctoral Fellowship program. I had gone into graduate school thinking I wanted to become a university professor, but my postdoc was when I realized that I wanted to pursue more applied science work, so I stepped off the academic path after that.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

Landing my first job outside of academia was challenging, and I was unemployed for nearly a year before something worked out. As I was leaving my postdoc, I met with a few people in my professional network who had also received their PhDs but hadn't pursued academic jobs, and their advice was invaluable. Based on that advice, I applied for jobs across a wide spectrum of organizations, from environmental consulting firms and government agencies to informal education and advocacy organizations. I networked as much as I could, meeting with anyone who was willing to talk to me at organizations I admired. And I did a lot of volunteer work that kept me active and growing. For example, I volunteered to help a fledgling nonprofit put together grant proposals, and I took part in Al Gore's Climate Project (now the Climate Reality Project), which got me thinking more about how climate science gets communicated.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

Ironically, my first non-academic job was at Rutgers University, where I was hired to help coordinate a university-wide initiative on climate change. For the first time, the work I was doing wasn't about my own research interests but rather about understanding the scope of climate-related work happening across the university. My role was to help build its coherence, scale, and visibility. It was fascinating to work with professors across academic disciplines, and I learned so much about the landscape of climate-related work beyond my relatively narrow training in paleoclimate. From there, and while my kids were little, I worked as a consultant for the American Museum of Natural History, helping to teach online ocean science courses for educators, and also for the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), carrying out research and analyses to further the organization's communications and policy advocacy goals. After several years of consulting, I joined UCS as a full-time staff scientist, where I built out a portfolio of climate impacts-focused research, served as a primary spokesperson for the organization to the media, and helped to shape climate-related legislation.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am currently the Vice President for Science at Climate Central, a small nonprofit organization that works to advance climate science and, in partnership with other communicators, tell salient climate stories for a range of audiences. Leading Climate Central's science team is really fun work in that I'm still very connected to climate science, and I'm constantly learning and growing. But I also get to help shape how that science gets used out in the real world, whether that's through talking with reporters about the contribution of climate change to an extreme weather event or helping to design a new interactive online tool. One of the parts of my job that is most gratifying is watching the people on my team grow. They're all incredible individuals who are dedicated to shining whatever light they can onto the climate crisis. I spend a lot of time and energy thinking about the projects and opportunities I can co-design with them so that they continue to grow and derive satisfaction from the work they're doing.

My current role draws upon the skills I've picked up over the years in school and in previous roles. For instance, the volunteer work I did in the science communication realm 20 years ago set me on a path to becoming a leader who thinks intentionally about how the science my team is doing is going to translate into compelling stories we can tell to general audiences. And the supervision and project management skills I learned at the Union of Concerned Scientists have enabled me to take on supervision of a much larger team at Climate Central.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

One of the things that drew me to an oceanographic education was that it required knowing a little bit of everything: some geology, some physics, some chemistry, some biology, and some computer science. This means that when I'm presented with a potential

research project on, say, wildfire smoke, I have some chemistry knowledge that can help me wrap my head around what we might do. Or when I'm considering how climate change is impacting food systems, I have enough biology in my back pocket to know how changes in ocean circulation affect fisheries. Having that multidisciplinary training prepared me well to dive into new topics and new bodies of scientific literature, which is something that has served me well throughout my career.

Is there any course or other training you would have liked to have had as part of your graduate education to meet the demands of the job market?

In hindsight, I wish I had taken a few classes that would have prepared me better for any path outside of academia. My undergraduate and graduate work were both fairly hands-on and applied—I spent a lot of time in the lab processing marine sediments and sorting tiny fossils—and I wish I had gotten a little farther outside that comfort zone and taken courses in statistics and computer science. I've made up for those deficits over time by teaching myself enough Python to get by and, more recently, using LLMs to help me understand different statistical modeling techniques—but a little more training would have gone a long way. I also wish that I'd taken a course or two on climate policy. Coming up through the physical sciences, I always heard my mentors say things like "you could always go into policy," but I came out of my graduate work without a clear sense of what that really meant, what additional context I'd need to secure such a policy-relevant role, or what the climate policy landscape looked like.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

I love my job! Even 20+ years out from my graduate work, I find our physical climate system fascinating and the scientific process to try to understand it gratifying. It's not easy work: My younger self thought we would have solved the climate crisis by now, and it's been difficult at times to keep pushing forward against seemingly ceaseless headwinds. But I appreciate that I'm doing work that feels purposeful—I know why I'm doing it day in and day out, and I feel like I'm working toward a future in which our planet will be a safer, healthier place. Working at a nonprofit means that everyone on my team is rowing in the same direction, whether we're scientists, graphic designers, project managers, writers, or programmers, and I really enjoy working with people who have such a wide range of skill sets.

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

There are countless ways to get involved in climate-related work, whether that's through scientific research, content creation, litigation, writing, or art. The fight for a safer climate is more a marathon than a sprint, so I suggest if you want to contribute, find a way to do so that is personally rewarding and that won't wear you down. In figuring out how or what you can contribute, reach out to people you admire, apply for jobs widely, don't be afraid to try new things, and, perhaps most importantly, don't wait for someone to start paying you for work you could start embarking on yourself. Love writing? Start a Substack. Love research? Download some climate model data and start digging in. Love art? Start creating and posting online. The more you can do to demonstrate to potential employers that you're already engaged in the kind of work you want to do, the more your resume will stand out. And the more people you talk to, the more avenues into this work you'll find.

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