

**MONA BEHL | Research Coordinator, Texas Sea Grant College Program, Texas A&M University
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Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I earned my bachelor's (2002) and master's (2004) degrees in physics from the Center of Advanced Studies in Physics, India, and my doctorate in physical oceanography (2012) from Florida State University. For my dissertation research, I used simple conceptual models and analytical techniques to study whether the temperature of Europe would cool or warm due to the slowing down of Atlantic meridional overturning circulation.

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

After obtaining my master's—yes. I taught physics, science, and English at various schools and colleges in India for almost two years. I also launched a coaching school to teach undergraduate physics to lesser-privileged women.

After securing my doctorate—no. I dove into science policy.

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

During graduate school, I attended the American Meteorological Society (AMS) Summer Policy Colloquium, and it sparked my interest in science policy. Thus, in addition to applying for generic postdoctoral positions during the final year of my PhD work, I also explored opportunities in science policy. Being an international scholar, I did not qualify for either of the Congressional Fellowships, and, unfortunately, I was not selected for the John A. Knauss



Marine Policy Fellowship or the Presidential Management Fellowship. However, I kept in touch with the directors of the AMS Policy Program, and was given the opportunity to work with them as a Visiting Fellow. It was one of the most intriguing experiences of my professional career. Working with a small interdisciplinary group of researchers, I was exposed to a number of issues at the intersection of science and policy. One of the most important lessons that I learned was the value of scientific integrity and ethics. My experience at AMS cemented my resolve to pursue nonacademic opportunities to advance science, and I started to apply for various positions in science administration, management, and leadership. Eventually, I landed two job offers.

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

I have always enjoyed teaching. While working at AMS, I also looked for online

teaching positions. Selected to work as an adjunct professor with the American Public University, I had the opportunity to teach oceanography and physics to military personnel and veterans. The flexibility to work on my own schedule while adapting to the needs of my students deployed around the world made this an incredible learning experience.

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

I am the research coordinator for the Texas Sea Grant College Program. In this position, I lead Sea Grant's research program, which includes coordinating the biennial research proposal process; developing and maintaining grants, fellowships, and scholarships; facilitating information exchange between research and extension; creating technical reports and databases; assisting in strategic planning and evaluation of program goals and objectives; and disseminating information through communication, publications, teaching, and outreach.

From the time that I was a small town girl in India growing up in a land-locked state, I have always been an explorer who likes to pursue the path less traveled. My first-ever flight was in the quest of attaining higher education in a field (oceanography) where I could apply my knowledge of physics. When I first came to the United States, I did not know what to expect. I did not think that I would end up in a nonacademic field. However, I always kept an open mind and challenged myself to stretch outside my comfort zone. My multicultural background

and diverse (personal and professional) experience continues to inspire me to cruise uncharted waters.

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

The ability to step back and appreciate the big picture. My academic training and professional experiences have made me appreciate the interaction of science with society. I spend a good amount of time talking to researchers working in diverse fields, learning more about their research, and connecting them to each other. I also invest time in understanding stakeholder needs and communicating those needs to the researchers, bridging the gaps between research, extension, and education across several fields.

Another important aspect of my training has been “experiential learning” (both in physics and oceanography), which added a personal connection and fueled my passion to forward science.

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

It sure is. Sea Grant’s mission (“science in service of society”) is closely aligned to my overarching career goal—to build bridges between science and society at both national and international levels.

One of my primary responsibilities is vetting research proposals—clustering proposals into overlapping topic areas and panels, recruiting panelists and other reviewers, overseeing the review panels, and making funding recommendations. Additionally, I monitor and oversee funded research. Therefore, I have the opportunity to reflect on the work of others, and also to bring my own vision to advancing the field of

oceanography. Being constantly in touch with stakeholders, I also get the opportunity to learn of the constantly changing research needs.

Leadership and management roles can be fairly challenging. It is these challenges that I enjoy the most.

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

1. Volunteer. There are many opportunities out there that will expand your skill set and the people you meet may be assets when you are seeking jobs.
2. Network. Introduce yourself to others, offer to share your expertise, and express interest in learning more. While searching for a job, reach out for informal informational interviews. Try to schedule meetings with various personnel during conferences.
3. Be persistent. I was turned down for many academic and nonacademic jobs and did not get many job interviews. Being an international scholar, I was also under several time-sensitive visa restrictions. When required, I gently reminded personnel that I was worth paying attention to, and it turned out to be worth it.
4. Seek a mentor. Mentors can shape your life for the better. 