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

In 2003, I earned my BS in biology from Brown University. After college, I wasn't sure that I wanted to go to graduate school, so I tried my hand at everything from environmental consulting to taxidermy. After that, oceanography looked pretty good, so I was excited to join the biological oceanography program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego.

For my dissertation, I worked on the abundance and ecological implications of microplastic debris in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre. My interest was inspired by activists who had raised a ton of public awareness—I wanted to know more about this problem, but at the time, there wasn't a lot of recent science. I ended up leading a student cruise to the eastern portion of the gyre in 2009, and those samples formed the basis of my research on how much plastic was out there and how it was affecting the local invertebrates. I finished my PhD in 2012.

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

No, I didn't. Because of family considerations, I knew I wasn't willing to move as much as an academic career would require. So, as I neared the end of my PhD, I started thinking about what else I could do with my skills and experience. Along with my science and the excellent education I had received at Scripps, I had two things going for me: Scripps' innovative Center for Marine Biodiversity and Conservation program had trained me in interdisciplinary work and communication, and I had engaged in a lot of informal science communication on my own.

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

I figured that learning about policy would complement my experience in science and communication, though at the time I wasn't all that clear on what policy actually was. Other Scripps students had participated in the Sea Grant Knauss Fellowship Program, so I applied as well, and was accepted to do a legislative fellowship in Congress. I was very happy to be placed with then-Congressman Edward Markey of Massachusetts on the House Natural Resources Committee for the first part of my fellowship. During the second half of my fellowship, he was elected to the Senate in a special election, and I was able to complete my fellowship there.

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

After my fellowship with Senator Markey ended, I decided that I wanted to continue working in Congress. I was fortunate to join the staff of Congresswoman Jackie Speier of California as a legislative assistant. In the House, most staffers cover a wide variety of issues, and when I started, I covered energy, environment, agriculture, transportation, science, technology, and consumer protection. I eventually became Congresswoman Speier's legislative director, and along with my original portfolio worked on additional issues, including national security, gun reform, and workplace sexual misconduct. I am especially proud of the work we did to reform Congress' sexual misconduct procedures and that our legislation on sexual misconduct in STEM fields formed the basis for significant policy change. All in all, I worked in Congress for about five and a half years.



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

I am the Director of Ocean Policy and Managing Director of Energy and Environment at the Center for American Progress (CAP), an independent non-partisan policy think tank that develops new progressive ideas and works to shape the national debate. In general, we try to advance good policy, make progressive gains where possible, and prevent roll-backs to positive policies. My path here was pretty straightforward—it's perfect for someone with a strong background in ocean issues who also has substantive policy experience.

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

I use my training every day, though not always in the way that I had imagined that I would (sadly, there is very little need for invertebrate taxonomy). My current work involves reading technical documents and pulling out the important

bits, crunching numbers and creating visuals, reasoning from first principles, and most importantly, writing. My career essentially comes down to being able to write well in many different styles. Even my Twitter addiction has been useful.

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?

I think both academics and non-academics would benefit from training in how to manage both people and projects. No matter where you end up, chances are you will have to manage one or both, and it's a skill that is surprisingly hard to master on the fly.

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

Oh yes, it's very satisfying to work at the intersection of science, policy, and politics. I love that I can combine both substantive work on emerging issues like offshore wind with more in-the-moment reactions to Congressional action (or inaction) and current events. I also enjoy that communication and outreach are integral parts of the job, and that there's lots of room for creativity.

The aspect of the job I like the least is that many policymakers in Washington, DC, see ocean issues as technical and obscure. It's remarkable how often people forget about 71% of the planet and the source of over half our oxygen. I often joke that part of my job is to jump into other people's policy conversations and yell "don't forget the ocean!"

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

If you know for sure that you want to go into policy, don't do a PhD. It's not necessary—first-hand experience in the policy trenches is more valued. If you have done a PhD, there are still plenty of opportunities in policy, but you must be an excellent writer and communicator. Having a strong, supportive network is so important to getting you through the inevitable tough times and setbacks. And don't worry if you don't have a specific career plan—work on developing valuable skills, and the opportunities will follow. 🌐