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

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in geology from Smith College in 1995, and a Master of Science (1997) and PhD (2003) in geological oceanography from the University of Delaware. My research examined the influence of the nearshore geologic framework on spatial and temporal variability in shoreline change rates along Delaware’s Atlantic Coast. After working for several years, I became professionally registered as a Certified Floodplain Manager.

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

When I was roughly half-way through my PhD field work, I left graduate school for the job I thought I wanted upon completion of my studies. In hindsight, while that was the best decision at the time and I had a very understanding and supportive employer, it was incredibly difficult to complete my research and write my dissertation while working full time. It’s not a path I recommend.

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

Every position I’ve held originated from a colleague’s tip or direct reference to an employer. While advertised jobs are worth tracking (even when you’re happily ensconced somewhere), I’ve found that employers often already have a candidate in mind, and I’m too late to the game. (If the job announcement is only open for a couple of weeks, this is almost certainly

the case.) In my experience, the key to getting ahead of the curve is having a broad network of professional contacts, people who are in position to let you know if relevant opportunities open up or, in some cases, to open a job for you.

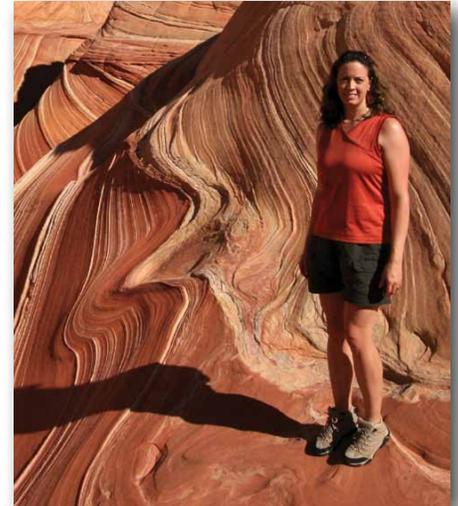
Is this the only job (post-academia) that you’ve had? If not, what else did you do?

As of my current position, I’ve had more jobs than years spent in graduate school—and for someone in science policy, this has been a very good thing.

My first “job” was really a fellowship. Between my MS and PhD, I spent a year as a Knauss Sea Grant Marine Policy Fellow, employed in the Mitigation Directorate at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in Washington, DC. I credit that position with showing me the range of potential roles for scientists in the public sector, and providing me with the nucleus of the professional network that still serves me today.

After (almost) finishing my PhD, I took a job as a senior coastal scientist doing floodplain mapping with an engineering firm, PBS&J (now part of Atkins Global). After three years, I was hired as a principal geologist at URS Corporation, where I led post-disaster flood mapping and related technical assistance to Gulf Coast communities on behalf of FEMA after the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes. It was very rewarding but very exhausting work.

Needing a career shift, I left consulting to serve as a Congressional Science



Fellow in the office of Senator Bill Nelson of Florida. This position was sponsored jointly by the Geological Society of America and the US Geological Survey as part of the Science & Technology Fellows Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. This position helped me to better understand how our legislative and executive branches truly function (and why they don’t sometimes), and to see for myself how and where science factors into an elected official’s decision making. The latter is a very individualized and personal process—just as “the public” is not some monolithic body, neither are elected officials. For someone in science policy, this was a critical lesson.

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

I am a coastal hazards specialist in the Coastal Geospatial Services division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA’s) Coastal Services Center. My job is an interesting mix of science and policy. My group works with state and local managers to develop geospatial data and tools that

support climate- and hazards-related planning and decision making. I also help represent NOAA on multiple federal interagency working groups to coordinate coastal hazards policies and risk-reduction activities.

As noted above, my path to NOAA was a complicated one, but that was by design. Knowing early in grad school that I wanted to work at the nexus of science and society, I knew I needed direct experiences that would help me understand the varying stakeholder perspectives on environmental and hazards-related issues. I draw from those experiences daily at NOAA, where I work on teams that craft policies, programs, or new products for stakeholders to use in solving their complex coastal challenges.

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

In grad school, I gained a deep appreciation for the interdisciplinary nature of oceanography, particularly in the immediate coastal zone. Similarly, I gained an appreciation of coastal engineering, and the differences between how engineers and geoscientists conceptualize and seek to understand the coastal system. Having such a broad view of the complex and interdependent physical processes governing the coastal zone actually made it easier for me to make sense of the similarly complex “people” side of things. In turn, that has enabled me to better anticipate the needs of diverse (and sometimes opposing) stakeholders in my work at NOAA.

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

I love my job—in many ways, I feel like I’ve finally found the right spot where I can use my accumulated scientific and policy expertise in service to society. I absolutely adore and respect my organization and the infectious enthusiasm and dedication of the people I work with. I sometimes get frustrated with the bureaucracy and pace of action, issues that are inescapable when you work in the federal government. It’s especially vexing when working across agencies and with lawmakers. In the end, though, I think these challenges make even the small successes all the sweeter.

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

Devote significant time and energy to the care and feeding of your professional network—both peers and senior-level mentors. My network has helped me in every career move I’ve made or contemplated. A really critical aspect of networking is to give as much as you get—in other words, be on the lookout for opportunities for your colleagues, and provide support when they need it. Don’t be that guy or gal who is only in touch when they need something.

Also, recognize that the days of working in one job until retirement are gone, so you need to maintain and enhance your skills and abilities on an ongoing basis. As you consider a prospective position, think critically about what knowledge or skills you will gain from it. Will it bring you closer to achieving

your career objectives, or is it just a job that will help pay the bills? Both choices are valid, but for the latter, you’ll need to manage expectations about how happy or fulfilled you’ll be there. I learned that lesson the hard way. 📧