FIONA HORSFALL | Chief, Climate Services Branch, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Weather Service (fiona.horsfall@noaa.gov)

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

I earned my BS in ocean engineering from Florida Atlantic University in 1989, and my PhD from the University of Miami/Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science (RSMAS) in the Division of Meteorology and Physical Oceanography in 1996. I worked with an ocean model to study the variation in the subduction rate of a passive tracer in response to changes in the atmosphere that I based on projected changes in global climate.

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

Just prior to defending my dissertation in 1995, I was offered a position at the National Hurricane Center (NHC) in Miami to work as a meteorologist programmer and research meteorologist. That summer was the worst hurricane season on record, so I was not able to finalize my experiments until the barrage of storms stopped, hence, the delay in finishing up my PhD until 1996. After defending, I stayed at the Hurricane Center and worked on extending track models out to five days, climatological studies of tropical cyclogenesis, and transitioning intensity models into operations.

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

With RSMAS located in Miami and with a close collaboration with NHC, I was aware of openings, and the director was aware of my work in numerical modeling, which was the skill he needed at the time. It was serendipitous that I was looking for a job and frequently visiting NHC.

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

I stayed at NHC until 2002 when I got the opportunity to transfer to National Weather Service (NWS) Headquarters to work on developing the climate services program at 150 offices nationwide. I stayed in that position until 2008, and then moved to the role of Director of the Climate Test Bed at the Climate Prediction Center, where I managed the transition to operations of research advances and developed plans for improving NOAA climate prediction activities.

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

In 2010, I was asked by the NWS Director to come back to Headquarters to assume the role of Chief of the Climate Services Division (now Branch). The NWS Climate Services Program has progressed significantly since I started working with it in 2002. In this role, I lead my team in developing training for NWS field staff in climate science and services, lead planning and policy development, develop and execute programmatic budgets, develop and nurture partnerships within the climate community both nationally and internationally, and coordinate requirements for NWS climate services.

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

My current role requires that I have in-depth knowledge of climate, atmospheric, and oceanographic science. Not only do I teach staff in these sciences, but I also serve as a subject matter expert on various panels, working groups, committees, and other formal gatherings.

Photo credit: Mark Da Cunha

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

My job is extremely satisfying! I am in a wonderful position to create a vision for our program that is science based and provides a critical service to the American public.

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

New grads should consider all options and carefully consider their passions. A career in academia is just one of many paths. At first, I was conflicted about joining the federal government because in grad school, you are trained to be an academic. However, using not only your scientific knowledge but also the discipline you gain from your intense program gives you more than just expertise in one specific area. My career has morphed over the years into management of science and services, and this suits me very well. The management option is quite dynamic, and to be truly effective requires a good foundation in science. There are many private sector options, too, and of course there is always government service, whether it be state, local, regional, or federal.