

ELLEN LETTVIN | Vice President for Science and Education, Pacific Science Center, on assignment as Noyce Fellow, Department of Education (elettvin@pacsci.org)

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

I earned a PhD jointly awarded by the Computer Science and Electrical Engineering and the Atmospheric, Oceanic, and Space Sciences Departments at the University of Michigan. I also did my undergraduate work at Michigan.

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

I worked for 11 years in academia, first as a postdoctoral research fellow, subsequently as an oceanographer, and later as a senior oceanographer and assistant director at the University of Washington Applied Physics Laboratory.

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

A recruitment firm contacted me.

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

Yes.

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

For the past five years I have been Vice President for Science and Education at Pacific Science Center in Seattle, Washington. Starting March 10, I am on assignment at the US Department of Education as the inaugural Robert Noyce Fellow in Informal STEM Learning (STEM = science, technology, engineering, math). The path I took to get to the job of Vice President for Science

and Education is somewhat circuitous. While working as an oceanographer at the Applied Physics Laboratory, I came to feel that, as a member of the research community, I had a responsibility to share the importance of and my enthusiasm for my work. I also felt that the Applied Physics Laboratory would benefit from elevating its profile in the community (defining "community" to consist of the University and business communities as well as the public in the Puget Sound region). To further these goals (both personal and institutional), I wrote a proposal to the director of the laboratory identifying several specific pathways that the lab could take to achieve broader awareness in the community, and defining the role I sought to play in bringing this about. He was supportive of the idea and was willing to devote some support to the project, so for four years I divided my time between conducting research and serving as Assistant Director for Education and Outreach at the lab. One of the organizations with which I collaborated to help achieve broad outreach with the public was Pacific Science Center—the local science museum in Seattle. As part of some strategic planning, the Science Center reorganized and created the position of Vice President for Science and Education. A recruitment firm reached out to me to see if I might be interested in the position. After learning more about the position and the institution, I decided to apply, and was lucky enough to be offered the job. I am now about to embark on a two-year fellowship at the US Department



of Education, focusing on integrating informal STEM learning in a variety of educational programs, with an emphasis on the out-of-school setting.

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

First, it provided me with content knowledge and expertise that I could bring to the development of Science Center public education programs focused on climate change and ocean acidification. Second, it provided me with strong quantitative and analytical skills that support decision making in many areas of endeavor. Third, it provided me with communication skills (written, verbal) that have supported all aspects of my work. Lastly, having an advanced degree outside of an academic setting can command a baseline of respect.

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

Yes, the job is satisfying. Engaging and educating the public about the STEM disciplines, and particularly about

climate change and ocean acidification, is very important. It is very rewarding to be able to envision a project or program focused on public education and engagement, to oversee its implementation, and to see (and measure) its impact. I like best the people with whom I work—they are passionate about their work and care deeply about public education. It is humbling to work with people who are devoted to this cause. The aspect I like least is the budget process. In a nonprofit organization, there is rarely enough money. The most frustrating part is that the programs that are the most important, where the need is greatest—educating and engaging underserved populations—relies most heavily on external support, and is therefore most vulnerable to funding cuts.

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

Think about what your best skills and special talents are. If you focus on those areas, you are most likely to find (or create) opportunities for personal excellence. The pathways that are well trodden by others are less likely to bear fruit because there are so many others pursuing that same avenue. Also, keep an open mind—on several occasions I found that the path I sought to pursue did not lead to where I intended—but did lead to something rewarding.