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

I earned my PhD in oceanography from the University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Oceanography in 2011.

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

I left academia a few days after I defended my dissertation and moved to Washington, DC, for an internship.

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

A few months prior to my defense I began looking for jobs on different listservs. I had been advised by a mentor to look for people doing the job I wanted to do and then to ask them how they got there. However, I did not see anyone doing the job that I wanted to do—to work in science communications and also stay connected to science.

I applied for several communications jobs, but as a scientist without any concrete communications experience, I was not even getting to the interview stage. I also wrote a postdoc proposal that did not get funded. I ultimately landed a communications internship with the Ocean Observatories Initiative in Washington, DC, that was specifically looking for a PhD student or a recent graduate. My intent was to learn more about science communications and gain the experience needed to be more marketable for other jobs. What I ended up getting out of it was an idea of and the foundation for a career of my own design—running my own science communications company.

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

Besides my internship, this has been my only job. I formed my company in June 2011 and that has been my source of employment ever since.

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

I am a freelance science communications consultant. I operate my own consulting company—Your Ocean Consulting LLC—from my home in Knoxville, Tennessee. Because I work on so many different projects with so many different types of tasks, the best way to distill what I do is to say that I tell stories. I tell the story of a researcher by designing his or her website. I tell the story of a program by developing an overall communications strategy for it and interacting with its stakeholders. I tell a project's story by analyzing data, conducting geospatial analysis, and writing a manuscript. Or I tell the story of a large, international, voluntary group of researchers who are passionate about a topic by helping them to find their common voice as I edit their multi-author reports.

I have always been interested in the intersection between science and its diverse body of stakeholders. During my PhD, I was an NSF IGERT (Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship) fellow in a program focusing on interdisciplinary problem solving for coastal management issues. Among other amazing experiences, this fellowship gave me the opportunity to intern with Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse during his first term. My doctoral research focused on stakeholder engagement as well as on hypoxia in Narragansett Bay,



which had direct implications for local upgrades to wastewater treatment facilities. This meant that several times a year I would meet with state and local managers about my research. As much as I could in graduate school, I also tried to find ways to tell a diverse audience about my research or about local impacts of climate change.

During the internship in Washington, DC, I began researching how to create my own company focused on science communications. We were just coming out of the Great Recession, and folks either did not have the money to hire an FTE or were stuck in a hiring freeze, but they still had work to do. I thought perhaps they could hire an hourly consultant.

My first opportunity came in an email from Nancy Rabalais at Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium. I had gone to sea with her as a student and she was wondering if she could hire me for sea duty again. I signed on, told her about my idea for the company and asked if it would be possible for her to pay my soon-to-be-created company instead of just paying me. That was my first contract, and my work with Nancy continues to this day. It also set the stage for how I would get all of my clients: (1) tell everyone about the business, (2) do good work so people want to keep you around,

and (3) jump on every opportunity given to you.

Soon my internship also expanded to a contract, and word spread about my work so one project then led to another and another.

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

I think it is critical for those communicating science to a broad audience of stakeholders to themselves have a deep understanding of that science and the scientific process. Having a PhD gives me the credibility of being an “expert” on the ocean, but more importantly I have the necessary background knowledge, so whether I am writing a brochure, designing a website, or planning a workshop, I know which components are important to glean from the materials provided. The scientists whose work I am translating can be confident that I will maintain the integrity of their work.

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 am well trained for my current work in the sense that a lot of what grad school taught me was how to learn something new. Between fieldwork and lab work, I learned to think on my feet and troubleshoot issues as they arose. Additionally, I took a very diverse course load through my IGERT fellowship. I also purposefully took courses to develop certain skill sets like MATLAB and GIS. These courses not only taught me about these powerful software tools, but about how to learn new software and how to search for answers when I didn't know how to do something.

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

I love my job. I feel like I am making a difference. I am always happy to go to work. I love that every day I do something different and engage a different part of my brain. I can be an oceanographer, a science communicator, a web developer, a community engagement manager, a graphic designer, a technical writer—whatever a project needs. I also love the work-life balance afforded by working from home. I have no set schedule and no set office space. This allows me the flexibility to take my two-year-old son to the doctor if he wakes up with a cold without any worry or stress. The flip side of this flexibility is that I often get to work before the sun comes up.

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

Look around you and find someone doing the job you want and ask them how they got there. If you don't see anyone, make your own job. 📍