2004–2005 Congressional Science Fellow Report

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Greetings from Washington, D.C., the self-designated center of All Things Important. Before arriving here, I was told by those who had come before me that my life would become "all political, all the time." Little did I know what that meant. A few months into the Congressional Science Fellowship, I now have a much clearer idea. Every article I read in the morning newspaper plays out in some fashion in the day's work on Capitol Hill. All conversations, be they at a bus stop, in a bar, or in a meeting on the Hill make reference in some way to one's political affiliation and opinions. Coming from the realm of science and academia, where everyone is most careful to remain as objective as possible, declaring one's biases on all issues at the start of any conversation is quite a culture shock.

Another shocking aspect of my transition to the congressional work life has been the dynamic change in pace from the deliberative, almost plodding, approach of academic research to frenetic decisions made with scant data and relying on a heavy dose of intuition in Congress. Adapting to life on Capitol Hill can only be described as trial by fire. Staffers are definitely here for the passion and commitment to civil service and public interest, and most definitely not here for the money or a humdrum existence. The turnover of congressional staff is remarkably quick, and common is the perception that one month should be long enough for a new person to be deemed the "institutional memory" of the establishment. The turnover of legislative issues is even more rapid. Given the flux of information flowing across my desk, I have quickly learned that institutional memory is the ability to read as quickly as possible and remember the phone numbers of the right people to call at the right time.

My institutional memory bank started with a three-week orientation from the American Association for the Advancement of Science for the 33 congressional fellows in the program. Following a tremendous course in the role of Congress, the executive branch, lobbyists, and the media in driving the federal government, and shedding all preconceived notions of the value and use of science in policy decisions, my fellow Fellows and I embarked on a year-long study of the federal policy process. We pounded the pavement to find an office in which we could both learn about the legislative process and contribute in some small way as science advisors to the policymakers.

I have chosen to join the office of Congressman Jay Inslee, a Democrat from the 1st District in Washington State. Having spent the past six years in Seattle and being familiar with the issues and general opinions of the people of "the other Washington," I feel an affinity with my current office. Representative Inslee is an active member of the House Resources Committee, is ranking member of the Forest and Forest Health Subcommittee, and is familiar with many natural resource issues. I joined Rep. Inslee's office as his legislative assistant for resources and education, where my background as an earth scientist and educator would be of most use. Issues I am currently working on include the conservation of wilderness areas and inventoried roadless areas, mining issues, the Magnuson-Stevens reauthorization and national ocean policy, climate change issues, the promotion of alternative energy generation, the generation and disposal of nuclear waste, Native American trust fund and land acquisition issues, the scientific peer review process, wildfires and the protection of at-risk communities from forest fire, the Higher Education Act reauthorization, public education reform, and women's health—as well as any other issues I would like to pursue in my spare time.

I am very excited about the opportunity to tackle such a motley assortment of issues, and I hope to bring a little of the analytical eye of an earth scientist to promote sound policy. Science is currently at a crossroads. Once the cornerstone of public policy, it is in danger of becoming politicized and its perception by the public as an infallible measuring stick for determining public risk eroded. There is a popular misconception that proper use of the scientific method should lead us to absolute truth, free of assumptions. It is in our best interest for each of us to educate non-scientists about the value of the analytical process and its inherent uncertainties. Thanks to GSA and the U.S. Geological Survey, I am trying to do my small part here on the Hill.

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