



A Perfect Placement

Todd Anthony Bianco

I am honored to serve as the 2012–2013 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow. The fellowship program came to my attention at the first social gathering I attended during graduate school. It was at a celebration for a postdoctoral researcher who was leaving the University of Hawaii at Mānoa to serve as a Fellow. At the time I was very excited to begin as a graduate researcher but I also knew instantly that a fellowship in public policy was an opportunity that matched my wider interests.

Since that day, I would periodically research the different public policy fellowships available for scientists and read the fellow reports and biographies from different hosting groups, such as GSA-USGS, AGU, and AAAS. Learning more about the fellowship taught me that I had specific academic milestones that I wanted to reach before I applied for the Congressional Science Fellowship. A few years later, near the end of my NSF postdoctoral fellowship at Brown University, it was clear to me that it was the right year to apply for the GSA-USGS Fellowship. It was hard to stay calm when I received an invitation to interview for the fellowship. After more than a decade of research experience, I could finally see a viable and rewarding career in academia, so this first step toward at least a year of feeling a bit out of my element was exciting and intimidating. After a very enjoyable interview with the selection committee in March, I was lucky enough to be selected for 2012–2013.

Although my predecessors have already documented the two-week orientation in September that kicks off the fellowship year, my first report would be incomplete without giving my take on the program. This is truly an exceptional experience. The daily crash course in policy and politics is enough to excite anyone in attendance, but the many speakers deliver a sense of gravity and importance to the endeavor of bringing trained scientists to Capitol Hill that leaves all of the fellows more inspired with each passing day.

After orientation, I took full advantage of the open doors during the interview process, interviewing with a dozen offices in both the House and Senate and in both personal and committee offices. I also used the vast network of current and former fellows to help with my decision. After two weeks of running from appointment to appointment, I accepted an offer to serve in the personal office of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island.

I was particularly interested in Senator Whitehouse's office, because he is a leader on environmental issues, serves on the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW), and serves as the Chair of the Subcommittee on Oversight. Also, I am a native Rhode Islander, and it was important to me to be connected to the office I served. For some Congressional Science Fellows, this connection could be the focus the office has on an issue that would draw on their specific expertise, but I also wanted to know, on a personal level, the community I would be working for, the places they live, and the issues that they care about. Interest in serving in a home state office was actually a fairly common feeling among the other Congressional Fellows and many of the personal offices that were hoping to host a fellow.

On Senator Whitehouse's staff, I work mostly with the environment and energy legislative assistants, known affectionately as his Green Team. We work on a variety of issues that range from meeting with constituents to legislative planning. My colleagues also encourage me to attend the many interesting briefings on The Hill and include me in meetings with other congressional offices and government agencies.

The significance of having a home state connection came early in the fellowship. When Hurricane Sandy hit in late October 2012, it was motivating to know the places in Rhode Island that were affected by the storm and that were being discussed by Senator Whitehouse and office staff. I was also honored to serve as staff to the Senator for an EPW hearing that brought attention to the devastation the storm caused, and I was able to help identify what stories Rhode Islanders would want the nation to hear.

One of my main tasks has been drafting speeches. Senator Whitehouse delivers weekly remarks on the Senate floor about climate change, the environment, and related issues. I have had the opportunity to help draft these remarks and to staff the Senator when he delivers them on the floor. While climate science is not my area of expertise, it is rewarding to help raise awareness about climate change and to help the staff and Senator be very accurate in making the case for action.

I encourage any scientist, at any point in their career, to consider the Congressional Science Fellowship if they have an interest in public policy. I also hope that anyone who is interested will feel free to contact me if they have questions regarding the fellowship in general or my personal fellowship experience.

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