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Researchers Take on a New Role: Advocate for Profession, Science

JULIE PALAKOVICH CARR

Scientists pride themselves on being objective purveyors of information. For some, this may seem at odds with delving into the world of public policy, where politics and spin seemingly reign supreme. For others, advocating on behalf of their profession and speaking up about the importance of science is model behavior for researchers.

“Collaboration between our leading experts in science and technology and Congress and federal agencies is the only way that public policy decisions will be made using sound science,” said Senator Jay Rockefeller (D–WV), chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, in a statement. “When drafting policy or regulations, we need to solicit advice from a spectrum of experts—from universities, nonprofits, industry, or scientific and professional societies—who deal in the issues every day.”

Of course, scientific knowledge is not the only factor weighed by lawmakers (politics and personal values also play an important role) but science can and should be part of the decisionmaking equation, according to those who work both inside and outside the system.

Members of the biological sciences community are stepping up across the nation to participate in the legislative process. Their engagement spans a range of activities, including meeting with lawmakers in the nation’s capital, consulting with local decision-makers, and participating in letter-writing campaigns.

Lida Beninson, a PhD candidate in integrative physiology at the University of Colorado, became involved in science policy after doing coursework on the topic. She met with the Colorado congressional delegation last year in Washington, DC, as part of the

Congressional Visits Day organized by the Biological and Ecological Sciences Coalition, a group cochaired by AIBS and the Ecological Society of America.

Beninson found that most congressional staff were easy to talk to and receptive to her request for sustained support for federal investments in biology. The best experience for Beninson, however, was talking to staffers who challenged her viewpoint. She found these lively discussions about the state of science interesting and helpful to her effort to understand how best to communicate with policymakers. “The people who push back a little are the ones who are really listening to your case,” said Beninson.

Beninson plans to stay active in science policy. “We’re in danger of losing federal support for science,” she said. “More and more congressional decisions depend on scientific guidance. It was gratifying to see that my expertise in science could benefit the field in a broader way.”

Researchers have also found ways to get involved in policy outside of the nation’s capital. Stephen Vives, professor and chair of the Department of Biology at Georgia Southern University, organized a tour of his department for Representative John Barrow (D–GA). The congressman visited the construction site of the campus’ new biological science building. In addition to learning about the facility’s green-building features, Representative Barrow was keen to learn about the research being conducted by faculty members. Vives used the annual Biological Sciences Congressional District Visits event last August as the prompt for reaching out to Barrow.

“Although I was a little bit nervous about the visit, Congressman Barrow

made it easy,” said Vives. “He asked questions and was very engaging. It was a nice conversation. I would encourage others to get involved. We need to get our story out and make it easier for our [elected] representatives to communicate the value of research.”

Scott Collins, a regents’ professor of biology at the University of New Mexico, has been an active participant in congressional meetings, science briefings, and letter-writing campaigns. “Everything we do depends on what happens in Congress,” said Collins. “As a community, we have not been very effective in getting our message across.”

Although Collins recognizes that each individual letter may not always have an impact in Congress, collective action by researchers does. “Congress makes a lot of decisions about ecology, and scientists need to be at the table when decisions are made,” said Collins.

The involvement of researchers is especially important in terms of federal investments in science, according to Collins. “If Congress does not hear from the scientific community about funding [for science], it is that much easier for our programs to be cut” during the congressional appropriations process.

The 113th Congress convenes this month, during which lawmakers will begin to debate numerous policies that will affect biological research and education. How beneficial or detrimental those policies are will depend, in part, on the input of the scientific community.

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