Early Career Members

Science Beyond the University

by Andrea Basche

It is easy to feel overwhelmed when seeking and applying for the “right” job. This is particularly so after the intensive investment of completing a graduate degree—even for those students with a laser focus on career trajectories. I likely cannot provide any strong advice that will make it easier to find the right gig right away. However, I can share some insights on my current research fellowship with a science-based policy and advocacy organization and provide a glimpse of what it’s like to be a scientist beyond the university.

“Advocacy,” in basic terms, is to support a cause. “Policy” could be described simply as a course of action. In short, I have personally prioritized being an active member of the democratic process, something I believe to be a great privilege and responsibility in our society. As an individual, I carry an orientation toward engagement, and that is at its core how I think about policy and advocacy in relation to my scientific training.

Engaged Science: Advocacy Organizations Offer Unique Insight into the Policy World

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) is a leading science-based nonprofit organization that conducts and reviews independent scientific analyses to identify and advocate for solutions that will lead to a healthier environment and safer world. We are a member-based organization with more than 450,000 members and supporters. We strategically deploy members of our Science Network—approximately 17,000 scientists and technologists throughout the country who are willing to get involved by doing things like talking to reporters about their expertise, testifying at governmental hearings, or meeting with their members of Congress.

A colleague with lengthy experience in the federal government recently shared great insight with me about her perspectives on advocacy. She described organizations as providing a unique lens into the policy world, as they are often very effective in promoting positions. She encouraged students to be open to advocacy work because of their efficacy—the “wins” these organizations show for their efforts. For example, UCS over just the last year helped to pass targets for renewable energy generation in California, defended legislative attacks on science, and convinced the USEPA to strengthen the role of renewable energy in its Clean Power Plan, which will regulate power plant greenhouse gas emissions. The Food and Environment Program of UCS, meanwhile, is advocating for presidential candidates to embrace the need for a national food policy that would reduce the harm our current food and agricultural policies are causing to public health and the environment.

From my perspective, advocacy organizations fill an important niche in a healthy democratic political system. They can monitor the work of government agencies, bring attention to issues that are often under-represented in the public sphere, and work to ensure that the science we are trained in is being used to inform policy decisions.