## Panel discussion: Introduction to Science Policy April 7, 2021

Summary by Todd Dowrey and Kara Farquharson



### Panelists (pictured left to right):

Ms. Jennifer Grodsky; BU Vice President for Federal Relations Dr. Naomi Webber; Senior Principal Consultant, Lewis-Burke Associates, Washington, D.C. Dr. Libby O'Hare; Senior Principal Consultant, Lewis-Burke Associates, Washington, D.C. Dr. Barbara Schreiber; BUSM Associate Professor of Biochemistry (Moderator)



Ms. Grodsky started today's panel with an overview of what science policy is, how it has developed in the United States, and information on careers in the field. She emphasized that science policy (the federal rules governing how science is conducted) is different than science for policy (using the scientific finding that smoking is a cause of lung cancer as a reason to ban smoking indoors).

She then moved into current topics of science policy which involve the COVID-19 pandemic, science and security, and the #STEMToo movement. In regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been agency policy changes in allowing grants to pay idled scientists who are unable to work amid shutdowns of laboratories across the country. Current questions on Capitol Hill involve funding extensions for post-doctoral employees, funding for caregivers, parents, immigrants working in American laboratories, etc. There are many questions regarding security and policymakers are working on legislation towards resolving these.

Ms. Grodsky then gave an overview of how science policy was developed in the United States. This involved the creation of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1950, after Franklin Roosevelt asked Vannevar Bush to recommend how the federal government should promote science to further national interests. Both National Aeronautics and Space Administration

(NASA) and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) were created in response to the Soviets launching the Sputnik satellite in 1957.

Ending the overview of science policy, Ms. Grodsky pleaded for scientists to be involved in science policy. With the COVID-19 pandemic as the headline for the year of 2020, it is obvious that policymakers need help from scientists. Ms. Grodsky urged attendees that the best way to be involved is through fellowships such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) fellowship.

### How did you get to where you are today?

Dr. O'Hare did her undergraduate degrees in psychology and neuroscience at Bryn Mawr College. Prior to her PhD at UCLA, she did a pre-doctoral fellowship at the NIH researching the genetics of schizophrenia. After her PhD, she did her post-doc at UC Berkeley and received the AAAS fellowship. She relocated to Washington, D.C. to serve as a fellow to Representative Rush Holt, who himself had a PhD and previously been an AAAS fellow. Dr. O'Hare worked on Capitol Hill for 3 years before moving to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. About five years ago she joined Lewis-Burke. Now she focuses on working with organizations dedicated to research, higher education and public health.

Dr. Webber started her PhD in physical chemistry immediately after her undergraduate degree. She wanted a career with people and sunlight and she moved to the UK equivalent of the NSF for a few years at which time, the British Embassy opened an office in Washington, D.C. Dr. Webber relocated in 2008 and remained in the position for 3 years and then, thanks to a conversation with the current president of Lewis-Burke at an NSF Engineering Advisory Committee meeting, she has been with the firm since 2011.

# What are some broad recommendations for the audience interested in this career path and what skills would be needed?

Dr. O'Hare emphasized flexibility in the job search. Opportunities can arise randomly if the person remains open to new skills and learning. The audience should know their passions and interests. She personally has always prioritized skill development as interpersonal skills are key.

Dr. Webber brought up fellowship opportunities as a formal entry into science policy. Most of their colleagues worked on Capitol Hill, K-12 education, outreach, and/or at science museums. She pointed out that those interested should be aware of political news occurring in Congress and the White House.

Ms. Grodsky, Dr. Webber and Dr. O'Hare informed the attendees that the ability to talk and write to different audiences is critical for success. It is common in Washington, D.C. for conversations to lead to job opportunities. Engaging in networking will allow for more connections and more opportunities. This is best done through volunteer activities and advocacy groups.

### In your positions, what are you looking for when you are hiring a new employee?

Dr. Webber described that she tends to hire the person rather than the position, meaning that an applicant's soft skills and ability to work collaboratively are just as important if not more so than technical skills. In her line of work, it's important that applicants show that they have researched the issues that the company works on and their body of work on those issues. Dr. O'Hare added that applicants who take initiative and apply the work ethic that they learned through PhD training are more competitive. She also stressed the importance of being able to work collaboratively in a teamwork leveraged organization like Lewis Burke.

Ms. Grodsky added that the interview process should be a back-and-forth conversation between the applicant and the hiring manager where questions are asked in both directions. This can show that the applicant is interested and has done prior research into the company.

### If you had to do it over again, would you do anything differently in your career path?

Dr. O'Hare started by noting that during her undergraduate education she was very focused on her science training and becoming a more competitive graduate school applicant that she forfeited taking other classes that interested her in the liberal arts realm or studying abroad. She noted that looking back now, a short detour from science to explore other interests will not set you back much in the grand scheme of things.

Dr. Webber described the presence of "imposter syndrome" in science and how scientists have to be open to new experiences and solving new problems based on their skillsets. It is common in science that someone else is not going to have the answer you need, so being proactive and self-sufficient is important. She also noted the importance of having a board of mentors instead of just one so that you receive advice and mentorship from a variety of avenues.

### How would you describe your work life balance and how you maintain it?

Dr. O'Hare started by describing how a good work life balance is important to her and was part of the reason she transitioned out of academic research where this balance is often lost. She keeps largely a Monday to Friday 9-5 schedule and tries to be as efficient as possible when in the office.

Dr. Webber added that is important to search for companies where work life balance is a core value and priority. It is healthy to not define yourself by the position you are in and the work you do. She keeps strong boundaries between her work and personal life by not giving out her personal phone number to coworkers to manage how she can be reached outside of work.

Ms. Grodsky finished by noting that she does not answer emails over the weekend so that she can fully unplug during her time off. She makes work life balance a priority when applying to new opportunities.

Are you interested in a career in science policy? Take a look at the National Science Policy Network (<u>https://scipolnetwork.org/</u>) to get started!