

Elizabeth Landau

Director of Science Policy and Government Relations at the American Geophysical Union



What is your current occupation?

I'm the Director of Science Policy and Government Relations at the American Geophysical Union (AGU) in Washington, DC. My work is focused on empowering scientists to work with policymakers. I provide resources, tools, and training for scientists at all levels so they feel prepared and excited to make a difference in science policy, which helps society and the world.

What is your educational background?

I have a BS and MS in Geological Sciences. In grad school I studied paleoclimatology and paleoceanography. I loved the big picture value of science—answering huge questions about the world around us—but I realized through that experience that I didn't want to work in a lab every day. Luckily, I found an internship opportunity in science policy that allowed me to try out a new career option, and I found a great fit for me.

A key message for students is that the geoscience workforce is dynamic, and boundaries between sectors and occupations are fluid. How has this been true in your career?

When I started in science policy, I was very focused on government relations—developing relationships with policymakers that would benefit the scientific community. Over the years I moved into more grassroots engagement work, where I focus on getting scientists excited and ready to make a difference in policy. I've been able to shift my focus within science policy to something that I see as important and love to do.

Where do you see your sector moving in future years? How would you advise students to prepare to be competitive job applicants and successful employees?

Science policy will be even more critical as we continue to deal with the impacts of climate change, advance in space science and tech, and work to ensure clean water and air for our communities. We will need people with a solid understanding of Earth and space science who are also strong communicators and can clearly articulate the key scientific issues to broad audiences. There is a lot of misinformation about science, and we'll continue to need people who are ready and willing to counteract that and ensure good science is included in our future policies. I recommend working on your writing and verbal communication skills for broad audiences, and to try out some science policy opportunities while you are a student to show your interest in the field.

What is the role of networking in your sector? Do you have advice for a student who is just beginning to build their network? What is the best way for students to get their foot in the door?

Networking is a wonderful way to get to know people in a field. If it's intimidating or if you don't know where to start, see if you have professors or friends who can connect you with people they know who work in your field of interest. Doing informational interviews with people is so helpful in figuring out what jobs are out there and if you really want to pursue a certain career path, and people are generally quite happy to help you out if you're courteous and only ask for a little of their time.

What does a "typical" day of work look like for you?

Because things change so fast in the policy world, I often start my day by reading the latest science policy news. The rest of the day is a mix of long-term projects and more immediate issues that pop up. The long-term work may include planning events like training sessions we are holding at a scientific conference, recruiting a cohort of scientists for a program that will train them in science policy outreach, or helping to update one of AGU's policy position statements. The more immediate work may come up due to what Congress and the Administration are doing that day, new scientific information that is released, or some other surprise. The work is very dynamic, which is one thing I really like about it.

What is the best part of your job?

Working with phenomenal scientists and helping them figure out how they can more effectively communicate with audiences who really need to understand their science. I can't tell you how many people I have taken to meet with their legislators who have been so intimidated before their first meeting, but by the end of the day they felt incredibly comfortable and loved the experience. It's like a lightbulb going off for them that they can truly make a difference in science policy, and it changes their lives.

Do you have any other comments or advice for students looking to enter your sector of the geoscience workforce?

One of my big pieces of advice when going into science policy is not to overlook internships—they are often paid in the science policy space and are a great way to get your foot in the door and meet people who will help you in your career. They can also be great to fill a gap if you want to apply for fellowships that won't start for a while. I took an internship after finishing my MS and it led me to the career I have today.

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