

Pranoti Asher

Assistant Director for Grants and Education Programs at the American Geophysical Union



What is your current occupation?

I am the Assistant Director for Grants and Education Programs at the American Geophysical Union. I provide a general description of my position as well as my responsibilities collectively below via this list:

- a. Develops independent strategic initiatives to create and drive grant-related programs to further develop and engage AGU's future workforce by engaging in collaborations and trainings as needed to ensure that the approach is sound.
- b. Develops strategies that effectively identify barriers to entering and completing undergraduate and graduate degrees in geosciences and related careers. Develops initiatives to communicate effectively to students and potential students through writing, speaking, and social media, among other channels.
- c. Supervises and mentors one full time staff member and interns, ensuring that their work is aligned with the overarching strategy, and mentors the staff so that they are able to be creative, innovative and generative in their work.
- d. Plays leadership role in other key member-facing education efforts such as geoscience education workshops and panels, STEM related meetings and regional workshops, including work with AGU partners
- e. Speaks publicly on topics related to Earth and space science education and educator engagement, scientist engagement and related initiatives.

f. Communicates with other internal departments about relevant aspects of education and potential workforce development and engagement.

What is your educational background?

I am a geoscientist by way of my educational background - my bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees are in the geosciences. I received my Ph.D. in the geological sciences from the University of Connecticut in 1995.

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?

This statement resonates with me. I started out in the academic sector and was a faculty member at various institutions during that time. I was a tenured faculty member of a geology and geography department when my family decided to move to the Washington, DC area. I ended up applying to a Manager of Education and Public Outreach position at AGU and this has now evolved into my current position. I still use my geoscience skills such as problem solving, communication (written and oral), critical thinking, etc. in my current position and as I transitioned from the academic to the non-profit sector (as a scientific organization/society, AGU as an employer belongs to the non-profit sector). Non-profits are smaller and one tends to become a generalist – one must become an expert or have knowhow on a variety of things. For example, I create and manage budgets and I learnt to do that while I was a faculty member seeking and managing my own grants. I speak regularly to audiences at conferences and other venues to students and professionals, something I did as a faculty member when I was communicating my science. So, I was able to easily translate my skills from the academic sector to the non-profit sector. The only thing I don't do is teach classes and grade papers! I do miss the teaching sometimes but can't say that I miss grading! I still read as many science papers as I can to stay current!

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?

The non-profit sector will continue to remain strong in the coming years. As the nature of geoscience workforce and future jobs evolve, professional and scientific societies (nonprofit sector) are continuing to evolve to meet the needs of their members, finding new ways to engage with their members, and being involved in meaningful ways to offer professional development and leadership opportunities to the next generation of scientists.

My advice to students is that one must learn to adapt to the changing and evolving nature of the geoscience workforce. Even the duties and responsibilities I listed above are evolving, so one must learn to be nimble. Flexibility is the key! Have an open mind and be creative in your thinking as you are contemplating your career. I hope that this [career infographic](#) from AGI provides some additional fodder for thought.

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 key component of any job search or engagement in any sector, not just in my sector. Networking whether in person or virtually or via email or via an event is a great way to build your network. If you can attend a scientific conference, do your research about the sessions and events you want to attend. Make your schedule and plan to come with either a business card or something that you can give to the person you meet. Follow up with that person once the conference is over. If you are not attending a conference but say, you attend a webinar and want to connect with the speaker or panelist, the same rules apply. Send a note about how much you enjoyed learning from this person and had additional questions. The best way to get your foot in the door is to be open to learning, being curious and then following up on that curiosity! I think another way to get your foot in the door is via internships or volunteer work at organizations. See this short article about skills building via internships (see: [Skills Development Through Internships at AGU and AGI | American Geosciences Institute](#)).

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

There is no such thing as a typical day of work for me! I always have meetings and have lots of emails that I need to respond to – so I spend most of my time writing and talking to people! Somedays I spend working and writing about higher level or strategic level concepts or ideas and some days I am working down in the weeds on solving a problem, helping my direct report or intern, or answering a question for someone in the organization or an external entity. Somedays are spent going back and forth between these and anything else that comes my way. I tend to break up my days into three buckets/types of work if you will. I am a morning person so if possible, I tend to do my best thinking or writing earlier in the morning (e.g. I am working on this document at 6 am today!!). I think of this as new and generative work. The second bucket is making progress on current work or ongoing projects. The third bucket of work is related to minutiae (e.g., email responses, getting information to others, etc.). Most days comprise of some time spent on the first two buckets and a fair portion of the third!

What is the best part of your job?

As a faculty member my work had impact on a student, or a whole class, or a handful of students who took an introductory course. My department benefitted too.

My work at AGU has impact at a grander scale. I like that the work I do and the products and programs that are generated has a global impact. That is the best part of my job and the work on AGU. It has a reach greater than a classroom or one student.

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

Partake in courses in computing and machine learning, dig in and hone your data skills if you are working on a research project, practice your communication skills by giving talks and presentations if you can, volunteer in organizations on campus or outside of campus to build skills (networking, communication, project management). As part of some work that I did for the AGI, I generated these career compasses (link: [A Career Compass to Navigate into Geoscience Careers | American Geosciences Institute](#); [Career Compass | American Geosciences Institute](#)) that will help you in your career preparation.

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Learn More:

[Reimagining STEM Workforce Development as a Braided River - Eos](#)

[Career Profile: Pranoti M. Asher \(carleton.edu\)](#)