My Week in D.C.: A Crash Course in How We Try to Shape the Future by Ryan Neely

NCAR is a truly extraordinary place. It is a federal organization where brilliant minds may gather and just think about the Earth system. Few other countries in the world support an equivalent organization. Some see NCAR and similar institutions as luxuries, but we know that NCAR is an essential institution devoted to service, research, and education. Yet, if no one hears about what we do here, does it matter? If our work is not contributing to making the lives of U.S. citizens better, is it essential for the taxpayers to fund NCAR?

In the face of questions like these — spawned from the current financial crisis, the impending sequester, and one of the most polarized and disliked Congresses in history — I headed to Washington, D.C. in March to lobby for science.

If you volunteered to go to Congress, what would you expect you were getting yourself into? In truth, I had no real idea of what would happen. As a person who is an extrovert and desires to make an actionable change for the betterment of our world, I thought this would be a great opportunity to see if the political arena of science policy held any allure for me; could I accomplish these goals and find a satisfaction in this work? I am also a huge fan of the T.V. show *The West Wing* and to actually go and experience just a bit of the feeling portrayed by the characters in that show was the chance of a lifetime for me.

So what did I go to Congress to do? I went to lobby (I know you think that is a four-letter word) for Science, Engineering and Technology as part of a larger effort of hundreds of scientists, organized by the AAAS, to visit Congress on the same day. The trip centered around a day full of meetings with Congressmen and their staffers. I personally attended six 30-minute meetings that spanned five different buildings spread over a square mile of Capitol Hill.

Before my day on The Hill, I went to a day of preparation at the AAAS headquarters in D.C., where I learned about the legislative process and the best tactics to communicate with Congressmen. I actually found that my experience with volunteering with middle-schoolers had prepared me well. Not to say that anyone on The Hill is dumb. The problem is that the amount of material and time crunches create short attention spans and knowledge-bases that are an inch deep and a mile wide. As such, I was given three
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countered on my day on The Hill is that everything moves at breakneck speed. Multiple meetings and issues are always on the table and you cannot afford to miss a beat; when a moment passes, you do not get a second chance to make an impression. You must be flexible to changes and prepared to have thoughtful meetings as you power-walk down a hallway. As such, I began my day feeling a bit like I was hit by a tornado, but as it went on, I found a rhythm and confidence that mostly stemmed from the fact that I know more than they do about scientific research.

I had prepared to tell the Congressional members I met that climate change threatens our security, health, economy, and environment, and it is crucial that Congress acknowledge what has already been recognized by the vast majority of the scientific community: that human-caused climate change is occurring; that its consequences have and are likely to continue to have serious impacts on our lives; and that we must take action to lessen the risks it poses, both by preparing for likely effects and by reducing CO2 and other greenhouse-gas emissions.

I feared, from my personal perception of Congress, that I would be confronted by climate naysayers. But as I am a constituent of Colorado, I met mostly with Congressmen and staffers who have heard of NCAR, and who also believe we need to be better stewards of the Earth and support science and technology, since they are backbones of Colorado’s economy. Yet, I learned that it was still important to show up and remind our representatives that scientists make up a large part of the constituents in their community, and the Congressmen should work toward being in a position to continue to support us. This meant asking the Congressmen and their staffers why they were not on Committees that appropriate funding to science. Even put tactfully, this is an awkward and complicated question to ask because the answer is dependent on the party in power of the specific chamber of Congress, the seniority of the Congressman and his relationship with their party leadership. Yet, it is important to ask because, in essence, it is asking them why are they not doing the job you think they should be doing. It was also good to let them know that their current resolutions are important steps in that direction, and to thank them for their commitment to focusing public attention on this critical issue, which has such a significant impact on our communities, our nation, and the world. As a scientist, I was encouraged by these meetings to

1. Explain who you are, what you do, and why your work is important from a local perspective, using lay terms.
2. Tie your research to economic impacts, such as jobs, in your congressional district. If your research is funded through a federal agency grant, tell them and let them know how it supports people in their district.
3. Ask them to have a steadfast commitment to stable and robust federal R&D in 2013 and beyond.

Hearing these statements and actually enacting them are quite different things. To effectively communicate these concepts would take practice, but it was good to be prepared with a Congressworthy elevator speech.

The first thing I encountered on my day on The Hill is that everything moves at breakneck speed. Multiple meetings and issues are always on the table and you cannot afford to miss a beat; when a moment passes, you do not get a second chance to make an impression. You must be flexible to changes and prepared to have thoughtful meetings as you power-walk down a hallway. As such, I began my day feeling a bit like I was hit by a tornado, but as it went on, I found a rhythm and confidence that mostly stemmed from the fact that I know more than they do about scientific research.

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see policymakers restoring sound science to its central role in helping inform critical policy decisions.

My favorite meeting of the day actually came when meeting with the Chief of Staff of a Congressman who did not share my views on the need for science and the reality of problems we face due to climate change. I saw this as an opportunity to actually make a difference and be heard. I left that meeting feeling great. I felt that the staffer and I really connected. I left feeling that the Congressman might give the topic of climate change the attention it deserves and work to ensure that public health, safety, and environment in the U.S. will be protected. The more I thought about it though, the more it made me wonder if that was what had happened or if I had just been schmoozed. As a neophyte at lobbying, I am unsure what happened, but I sincerely hope I made the case for science.

Now, back in Boulder, I have asked myself what I learned from this experience. Initially I was unsure. This was partly because I caught the flu, but partly it was because it was a completely new experience that presented me with an overload of information to process.

After I recovered, I realized that the best lesson I learned was about storytelling. It is a skill that can be applied to seeking funding in any form. You must tailor your story to the person listening so that you make a connection. If you do not accomplish this first and foremost, the Congressman and staffer (i.e., potential funder) will not accept your premise. In the language of Washington, the reason you have a meeting is because you want to ask someone for something you need. The ask, as it is called, is the essence of a meeting. How you present it and how you show why the Congressman also needs it is the battle. This is the same as applying for a grant, but in Washington you get immediate feedback in the form of body language and cues from the conversation as to whether or not you are accomplishing your goal. Like most grant-funding institutions, you still only get one chance. Thus, this was a great experience in learning the art of rhetoric. I was in the room with accomplished rhetoricians (i.e., professional lobbyists), and I had the amazing opportunity to hone my own ability to formulate a story.

Closely tied to the idea of connecting people through story-telling, is the idea that all politics is local. Through my experience, I came to know why this maxim is true and how you can use it to your advantage, to tell the appropriate version of the story for your audience. When you walk into the office of a Congressman, you immediately know who he is, where he comes from, and what issues he supports. Usually they have a display of accomplishments and information about their district. This may just be a map, or it may be 1000 toy tractors. Locality may be one of the hardest things for a global climate model to deal with, but it is essential to be able to discuss the possible impacts of climate change on different regions – be it for agriculture or the skiing industry. You must also discuss how your issues make the lives of the people in the district or state better, either through providing jobs and creating an industry, or providing necessary goods and services. Though Con-
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gress has built bridges to nowhere in the past, the recent belt-tightening has created an atmosphere of funding essential needs only. What that means is different to every Congressman, which is why the culture of Congress has been so contentious over the last several years.

Thus, the real goal is to show the Congressman that there is a middle ground where they can agree with other members of Congress. You and I know we need to explore and have people thinking creatively at the edges of science, engineering and technology, but this is abstract and difficult to leverage into funding. There are often not concrete outcomes that Congressmen can justify to voters. We know that, without science and exploration, we would not have picked ourselves up out of caves and made it to the moon. We would also not have created the problems we face today in a world that has just crossed the 400ppm level of CO2 for the first time since mid-Pliocene, 2 to 4 million years ago.

Although many hold Congress in contempt due to their recent legislative stagnation, I learned that there are many smart people doing the best they can to serve their constituents and the country. This is something we must remember. Though they are not scientists or engineers, they are thoughtful, intelligent people who are passionate about what they do, and that is something we have in common. We must use this common ground and work together to support the change we want to see. As common ground, scientific research and development is a bipartisan issue—science has a long history of bipartisan support.

In a selfish sense, this whole trip was a fight for my job. Like many of you reading this, I probably have another forty years in my science career and, without the support of the NSF, which is funded through Congress, it is going to be a long, hard slog. I used my youth as a tactic on many of the Congressmen to help remind them that science is a continuing process and an industry that constantly needs new people to pick up the torch from the previous generation and push the frontiers of knowledge forward. As young scientists, this is really why it is our duty to get out there and let the decision-makers know why what we do is important and how it impacts them and their constituents.

Another important lesson I learned was that this is not a one-off experience. I was there to begin a long-term relationship as a resource to the congressional offices. I made sure to ask if they had any questions, and then followed up with more information. This is a great and easy service we can take time to perform, as we are experts with extensive knowledge that Congress supports. We owe it to them and to the country to pay back by providing information readily when it is needed. It also may open doors to support and change that would not have been possible unless a relationship had been made with a policy-maker.

I also learned that even during these difficult economic times, a majority of Americans disapprove of cutting funding for scientific research as a way to reduce the national debt. Unless this is brought to Congress’s attention, it may be cut because there is no one putting pressure on them to do otherwise. But our story must be conveyed concretely and personally to the people we have elected to solve our problems. We must convey that research is a long-term investment in our future that drives the economy through scientific discovery and technological innovation. Deep cuts today deprive the entrepreneurs of tomorrow of the tools and knowledge they will need to keep the U.S. competitive in the global economy. If honest discussions with our representatives do not result in change, then we must use our most profound lobbying tactic and go to the ballot box and vote for someone else. Decisions are made by those who show up and participate. That is something I hold to be essential, be it in science or politics, and that is the reason I really went to Washington. I hope that more scientists, especially young scientists, will do the same.

From what I learned, I think my experience in D.C. exemplified how the legislative process is supposed to operate, though during the previous Congress this was anything but true. Recently Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine left Congress because she was so resigned to the inability of the current legislative process to get things done. Though she blames some of this on Congress, she acknowledges that it is not entirely their fault. After my visit, I saw some truth in this. If we want change and we want to live in a society that values what we do, we must make it happen. I leave you with one of my favorite quotes that I feel sums up the feeling that we as scientists must convey.

“Over the past half century, we’ve split the atom, we’ve spliced the gene and we’ve roamed Tranquility Base. We’ve reached for the stars and never have we been closer to having them in our grasp. New science, new technology is making the difference between life and death, and so we need a national commitment equal to this unparalleled moment of possibility...” Sam Seaborne, The West Wing

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