

Sea Grant Knauss Fellowship

Lessons Learned

(Updated October, 2008)

Pre-fellowship

Pre-Interview week

Money:

Make sure you have about \$2000 to set aside for expenses (hotel, travel, food, etc.). You may be able to get a cash advance-check with your Sea Grant office. Find out how long it will take to get reimbursed, as it may take several weeks (or months in some cases). Make sure you save all your receipts during placement week!

Host

Read the host offerings and look up the offices on the web. Remember, fellows are not allowed to contact host offices, but you can contact current fellows and ask them questions about their position or experiences.

During Interview Week

- Be prepared to wear suits or other conservative, professional attire. You may want to bring comfortable shoes to wear in between interviews and during transit time, as you will be doing a lot of walking this week.
- Stay relaxed, be flexible, and stay open-minded
- Don't pre-determine where you want to go
- Remember this week, as well as the fellowship itself, is an educational opportunity for you.
- Ask lots of questions-refer to sample questions
- Limit the number of interviews you schedule. Having options is good, however, not getting complete information about the offices, the type of work, or the people you will be working with can lead to disappointments or misconceptions.
- Remember that the hosts want you, you don't have to sell your self like you do in a job interview.
- Contact the current fellow in the office (if there is one)
- Make sure you can interview or speak with co-workers and your potential immediate supervisor
- Check to see if the office accepts international students (if applicable)

After Placement Week, Before You Start –

Health Insurance

- Start checking into this soon-it may take 6-8 weeks for an application to be processed. Depending on your school you may qualify for health insurance through your university.
- Find out about your status (student/non-student)
- When checking into health insurance, look into the following things:
 - Local/private providers
 - Deductible/co-pay

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Local treatment if using a program from your own state

E-mail

E-mail-make sure you are in e-mail contact between the placement week and the start of the fellowship. Use yahoo, hotmail, etc. if you're no longer in your school e-mail system

Pay: Get school payroll paperwork done before you leave your home state. This will help ensure that you get your first paycheck in a timely manner. There have been instances where fellows did not receive their first paycheck until March 1 or later because of paperwork problems.

Taxes: The state you will be living in for the fellowship (MD, VA, DC), is probably where you will have to pay state taxes, so make sure your sponsor state doesn't take out taxes for your home (pre-fellowship) state. Legislative Fellows, if you happen to be working for a member from your home state, you may be able to still pay taxes in your home state. Check state rates first and try to pay the lowest. DC is generally higher than any other. In some cases, your school will not take out any taxes (including federal), so you will have to estimate them and pay quarterly (or pay penalties). Here's how: www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p505.pdf.

Apartment Hunting: Realtors are helpful; often you can make an appointment and they can show you several places at once. Don't be afraid to ask people gardening if they know of any places available if you like the neighborhood – it's a good way to get someplace before it's in the paper. Spend plenty of time walking around looking for signs and explore all the options. Once you find a place you like, be prepared to pay a \$20-40 application fee.

Apartment Hunting Websites: Check out hillzoo.com, rollcall.com, yarmouthmanagement.com, johncformant.com, washingtoncitypaper.com (new listings online every Tuesday), and washingtonpost.com. Many DC-area universities also have on-line housing services that the public can access. Another company with good Hill rentals (but no website) is FitzGerald Properties based in McLean, VA.

Apartment Security: When looking for an apartment, walk by it at night to make sure you are comfortable with the neighborhood. Each police precinct has someone who will give you a crime report for that area. Landlords and property managers are required by law to tell you the history of crime in your building. They might tell you that they can't tell you about the neighborhood, especially if they are trying to keep you from knowing that it's a bad neighborhood.

The real estate section of <http://www.washingtonpost.com/> has detailed crime reports by area. In the NE, try not to live past F or 10th. Capitol Hill police also patrol out to 6th, so you get double protection there. In the SE, don't live past 14th or G.

If you feel you need extra protection, the Alexandria Police department (and likely other cities as well) has FREE police inspections of your apartment for crime prevention

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strategies and to suggest various safety provisions – this is highly recommended. It's also a good way to get one's landlord to provide some basic precautions (smoke detector, fire extinguisher, CO detector) and for you to set up a fire evacuation plan.

Also, making an inventory of your stuff (this can be easily accomplished by photographing your rooms full of your belongings in your new apartment and by putting the daily paper in the photo to create a proof of the date) can be key. Writing down ID numbers from your large expensive items is important. Note that one can check out (!) an engraving pen from the local Northern VA library; put your ID on your stereo equipment and TV.

Moving

You can change your address with the post office, locate contact information and sign up for utilities and services (newspaper, cable, phone, gas, internet, etc.), and obtain community information at the following site:

<https://www.moversguide.com/>

To register to vote in your new locale,

In Maryland:

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/41electp/html/local.html>

(You'll have to navigate to your county, but this site provides all sorts of useful government info.)

In DC: <http://www.dcboee.org/>

In Virginia: <http://www.sbe.state.va.us/>

To locate a vehicle registration office, register your car, or get a new driver's license:

In Maryland: <http://mva.state.md.us/>

In DC: <http://dmv.washingtondc.gov/main.shtm>

In Virginia: <http://www.dmv.state.va.us/>

If you get a new driver's license in VA, there is an option to either put your SSN or a "Control" number on your license. The Alexandria police strongly suggest getting that control number. They report that the biggest crime wave that they are seeing is identity theft – and that it is a direct result of robbing an innocent of their wallet containing a license with attached SSN.

Parking: If you are going to have a car here, be prepared to pay extra. Apartments will charge more if off-street parking is provided, and on-street parking can be very limited in some neighborhoods. If you need to do on-street parking, you will need to get a permit from the DC DMV (hell) that will allow you to park anywhere in your "zone" of the city. The annual fee for this permit is cheaper for cars registered in DC (more expensive for non-DC registration). See <http://dmv.washingtondc.gov/serv/parking.shtm> for more info.

Gyms:

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(On the Hill): There are 3 gyms on the hill. Results and Washington Sports Club (WSC) are both about \$79/month and have a sign-up fee. They both run specials on the sign-up fee only. Results has more equipment and classes than WSC, so it is worth the \$\$\$. There is a Gold's Gym across from the Ford Building, about half the price of the others, and it's convenient if you work for the House Resources committee. There is a free community pool next to the Eastern Market. There are also many groups for a variety of sports (e.g., Potomac Running Club, Capitol Hill Tennis Club), so be sure to ask around.

(In Silver Spring): There is a gym facility in building 3 at NOAA. It costs about \$19/month but must be paid in 6-month increments, and has a sign-up fee. The only draw back to this gym is that it is open from 6:30 AM - 7:00 PM (hours vary some seasonally). Silver Spring also has a YMCA located near the beltway on Georgia Ave. The monthly fee varies depending on household or individual memberships and it has a sign-up fee as well. This gym has an indoor and outdoor swimming pool, offers classes, and has weights. There is also a Gold's Gym in the City Place shopping center.

NOAA/NIH has many social clubs that you can join to meet fellow employees while enjoying a favorite activity. Some of these clubs include Aikido, Badminton, Theater, Bicycle Commuter, Camera, Chamber Music, Chi-Kung, Country Line Dancing, Fencing, Golf, Running, Hiking, Tennis, Yoga, Softball, Sailing, and Ski clubs.

For more information, to propose a new NOAA/NIH club or activity, or to get the name of a contact person for a particular group, visit <http://www.recgov.org/r&w/clubs.html>

Banking

Set up a bank account locally as soon as you have a local address and set up direct deposit. This will save you a lot of headaches and waiting for checks from your university. Department of Commerce has a credit union. Many of the other agencies do too. Credit Unions are generally low or no cost, but may have limited hours. Other large local banks include Bank of America, Citibank, FirstUnion/Wacovia, Chevy Chase Bank.

Re-confirm your start date

Re-confirm the start date with your host. This will serve two purposes. It will remind them that you are coming and give you an opportunity to ask about any necessary reading, opportunities to visit the office prior to the start, or possible early travel opportunities with your host.

Getting Started

Expect to spend "catch-up" time getting familiar with the office and the issues and perspectives of your new office. If possible, find a mentor or someone you can ally with to help you get through the first few weeks/months. At some point during your initial

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weeks, you may be asked to write up a work-plan. Be prepared with some project ideas, just in case they are willing to let you create your own projects.

Business Cards: While you are here, network, network, network! Remember to take a stack of your cards with you everywhere you go. Order cards the first week of work as they take anywhere from 2 weeks to 2 months to get to you. Some offices will pay for this; in others, you will pay for this.

Good Associations to Join

- Women's Aquatic Network (WAN)
- CLSA (Congressional-based group, but executive fellows can join)-put the application and check directly into Hill mail (do not use US Postal Service-takes months to arrive). Kola has the application form.
- Toastmasters (good practice for delivering presentations)

Further Education (if you haven't had enough at this point)

USDA Graduate School offers classes in almost everything, from foreign languages, to natural sciences, and career development

Find them at: www.grad.usda.gov

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For Legislative Fellows

Working on the Hill –

Office Policy: As soon as you start work, review your office's policy manual. It will be important to conform to office policy as much as possible, but remember that you are not an official employee of Congress so some rules (of course, those about pay or benefits) will not apply to you. Your office does not pay your salary (Sea Grant does), so they should accommodate your personal and educational needs (e.g., for days off) to a reasonable extent. Be flexible, as each office has their own approach for working with fellows. On Senate committees, you will need to fill out quarterly forms verifying that you are paid from outside the Committee, so see your Chief Clerk about these.

Dress Code: When the member is not here and there are no votes scheduled, then the dress is often business casual. Even jeans are acceptable for some offices, unless you are meeting with someone. When the member is here or if floor votes are scheduled, business suits are required. For women, there is more flexibility in what is considered business attire – you will get a feeling for that once you are here – but a suit is always appropriate and often the easiest option. No printed t-shirts, but sandals are OK in some offices. Some offices will have more strict dress codes, so adapt as needed. Those of us who walk to work like to leave our dress shoes under our desks and wear comfy shoes back and forth.

Working Hours: Most offices work 9-6 in session, 9-5 in recess (at a minimum; days often run well into the evening). Be prepared to stay late (perhaps midnight or later) when your work is subject of ongoing floor debate. Sometimes the state time zone makes a difference (e.g., offices of western states may end later).

Days Off: Some offices will give you 20 days; others will allow days off on an as-needed basis. Try to plan them out of session if possible.

Sick Days: If you get sick, there is a nurse in almost every building. Also, you can call in sick as needed, since offices shouldn't expect you to work while you're ill!

Memos and Talking Points: Depending on your office, you may need to write many memos and talking points, up to several each day if a lot is happening. Memos, often one page long, are used to summarize information on evolving issues and update your member as well as other office staff. Talking points are generally short bullet lists of statements that your member can use to summarize his or her understanding of and perspectives on an issue. Each office will have different formats and preferences to guide the writing of memos and talking points. Few issues have never been brought up in Congress before, so if you need to write these, the subject is most likely somewhere on your hard drive in a document written by previous fellows or office staff. The best way of learning office style is to imitate or cannibalize these! Don't make more work for

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yourself by starting from scratch. If there is a corresponding one or two-page document, you can attach it to the memo.

Constituent Mail: Some offices will require you to answer constituent mail. If you are on the House side, you may need to attend a Quorum class to learn how the mail system works. You can write form letters to answer 3 or more letters on the same topic, or you can write individual letters to answer 1 or 2 letters or VIPs. There are many examples of both types of letters available in your office from which you can learn.

Dear Colleagues: You may send and will receive many “Dear Colleague” letters. These are general paper/electronic letters that a member sends out to other members of Congress (or an appropriate subset, like members of coastal states) seeking to inform or gain support on a given topic. They generally contain information on what is being sought (for example, a signature on a letter) as well as background information on the issue. There are specific rules to follow when sending these from your office. Your office should already have a contact list that they often use to send out Dear Colleagues; if not, consider creating one.

One-Minutes: One-minutes are speeches a House member may make on the floor, generally related to legislation on the floor schedule for the day. These provide a good opportunity for your boss to comment on an issue.

Lobbyists: Part of your job will be meeting with lobbyists, who are usually based in DC and hired to represent a group in your district. They may dress and talk like they are from your district, but they may not be. They will generally schedule a meeting with you and possibly the member to inform you on an issue and will probably ask for an appropriations earmark. Try to give the member a memo on the group and their request prior to the meeting, if possible. Once you are in an office, you’ll need to learn any other office protocol about handling these meetings. Learn the rules for accepting gifts – there are limits on what you can accept for lunches, travel, entertainment, and other gifts.

Federal Budget: You will need to read the President’s budget when it comes out, probably in February, specifically the sections on NOAA, the Department of Interior’s Fish and Wildlife, and any other agencies relevant to your office. Be looking for items that affect your member’s state. This will lead right into appropriations.

Appropriations: See if you can find copies of what appropriations request letters were sent from your office last year. Definitely, look for requests to Commerce, Justice, State (CJS) and Interior, as well as any other types of requests. It is likely that a lot of last year’s requests will be repeated, so you need to know who asked for what and how much they got, if any, and how much the President’s budget allots for that area this year.

Congressional Research Service: The CRS is part of the legislative branch. CRS, which is a department of the Library of Congress, works exclusively as a nonpartisan analytical, research, and reference arm for Congress. The CRS will do research for you on any topic of interest to your Member or Committee. They also offer many types of

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orientations, seminars, and on-line briefing documents that may be useful to you. Take advantage of all the classes possible while working as Congressional staff. It will make your work life easier and the classes are FREE.

For more information see: <http://www.crs.gov>

And, as a staffer, you have access to borrow books from the Library of Congress for your personal use (e.g. they have a very complete and current selection of Lonely Planets).

Receptions: Keep aware of evening receptions offered by agencies and special interest groups, as they provide great networking opportunities with free food and drink. Also, the Congressional Legislative Staff Association (CLSA) hosts embassy events and briefings for a \$20 yearly membership (Miguel has the form or it can be found at http://www.congressionalstaffers.org/membersite/index.cfm?action=become_a_member).

Other Things to Know –

Capitol Tours: Staffers may give Capitol tours without a reservation by entering through the staff-led tour door. Reservations will make the process smoother, but even without one you may still have to wait in line.

Mail: All DC mail, even your home mail and FedEx, is now being irradiated, so it takes a little longer to get to you.

Resume Bullets: Consider adding some form of these to your resume:

- One of 10 graduate students chosen to manage legislative affairs involving oceans, fisheries, environment, energy, interior, and agriculture policy in a Congressional office.
- Responsible for drafting and tracking legislation and appropriations requests; formulating position statements; writing speeches, testimony and floor statements; and responding to constituent requests.

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For Executive Fellows

Office Policy: As soon as you start work, review your office's pertinent documents. It will be important for you to understand the "official policy" of your office, as you are now a representative and will be working toward those objectives. In some offices, this may be more important than others. You should also be familiar with any legislation that guides your office or projects.

Dress Code: Individual offices have different dress codes. Generally, business casual is acceptable. Even jeans are acceptable for some offices, unless you are meeting with someone. For women, there is more flexibility in what is considered business attire – you will get a feeling for that once you are here – but khaki dress slacks (or skirt) are appropriate and often the easiest option. Sandals are OK in some offices. Some offices will have more strict dress codes, so adapt as needed. Ask the current or past fellows if you need more guidance.

Working Hours: Some offices offer flextime or flex-hours. Each office policy will vary. Some offer 4 ten-hour days per week, others offer 9 nine-hour days, with the tenth day off. The standard, work hours are 5 eight-hour days. Check with your office to find out if there are core hours, flextime, or flex-hours.

Don't forget to take time for events (Fellowship-sponsored activities, Hill events, etc.) and talk to your supervisor about taking time off for these activities.

Days Off: Some offices will give you 10 days; others will allow days off on an as-needed basis. There is no set policy. Ask what your office/supervisor will allow. Make sure you let your office know if you are planning to take time off for conferences or school. These do not count against your vacations days.

Sick Days: If you get sick, there is a nurse in SSMC #2 on the 9th floor. Also, you can call in sick as needed, since offices shouldn't expect you to work while you're ill!

Security: Security will differ between agencies. In general, you will be required to wear a security badge. Be prepared for a full security check with the names and addresses of previous employers, roommates, and character references. (And, they do check!)

If you are going to have visitors at work, you can notify security in advance by contacting the security supervisor.