

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE OCEANOGRAPHY SOCIETY

Oceanography

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CAREER PROFILES Options and Insights

MIRIAM GOLDSTEIN | Director of Ocean Policy and Managing Director of Energy and Environment, Center for American Progress (mgoldstein@americanprogress.org)

Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

In 2003, I earned my BS in biology from Brown University. After college, I wasn't sure that I wanted to go to graduate school, so I tried my hand at everything from environmental consulting to taxidermy. After that, oceanography looked pretty good, so I was excited to join the biological oceanography program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego.

For my dissertation, I worked on the abundance and ecological implications of microplastic debris in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre. My interest was inspired by activists who had raised a ton of public awareness—I wanted to know more about this problem, but at the time, there wasn't a lot of recent science. I ended up leading a student cruise to the eastern portion of the gyre in 2009, and those samples formed the basis of my research on how much plastic was out there and how it was affecting the local invertebrates. I finished my PhD in 2012.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

No, I didn't. Because of family considerations, I knew I wasn't willing to move as much as an academic career would require. So, as I neared the end of my PhD, I started thinking about what else I could do with my skills and experience. Along with my science and the excellent education I had received at Scripps, I had two things going for me: Scripps' innovative Center for Marine Biodiversity and Conservation program had trained me in interdisciplinary work and communication, and I had engaged in a lot of informal science communication on my own.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

I figured that learning about policy would complement my experience in science and communication, though at the time I wasn't all that clear on what policy actually was. Other Scripps students had participated in the Sea Grant Knauss Fellowship Program, so I applied as well, and was accepted to do a legislative fellowship in Congress. I was very happy to be placed with then-Congressman Edward Markey of Massachusetts on the House Natural Resources Committee for the first part of my fellowship. During the second half of my fellowship, he was elected to the Senate in a special election, and I was able to complete my fellowship there.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

After my fellowship with Senator Markey ended, I decided that I wanted to continue working in Congress. I was fortunate to join the staff of Congresswoman Jackie Speier of California as a legislative assistant. In the House, most staffers cover a wide variety of issues, and when I started, I covered energy, environment, agriculture, transportation, science, technology, and consumer protection. I eventually became Congresswoman Speier's legislative director, and along with my original portfolio worked on additional issues, including national security, gun reform, and workplace sexual misconduct. I am especially proud of the work we did to reform Congress' sexual misconduct procedures and that our legislation on sexual misconduct in STEM fields formed the basis for significant policy change. All in all, I worked in Congress for about five and a half years.



What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am the Director of Ocean Policy and Managing Director of Energy and Environment at the Center for American Progress (CAP), an independent non-partisan policy think tank that develops new progressive ideas and works to shape the national debate. In general, we try to advance good policy, make progressive gains where possible, and prevent roll-backs to positive policies. My path here was pretty straightforward—it's perfect for someone with a strong background in ocean issues who also has substantive policy experience.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

I use my training every day, though not always in the way that I had imagined that I would (sadly, there is very little need for invertebrate taxonomy). My current work involves reading technical documents and pulling out the important bits, crunching numbers and creating visuals, reasoning from first principles, and most importantly, writing. My career essentially comes down to being able to

write well in many different styles. Even my Twitter addiction has been useful.

Is there any course or other training you would have liked to have had as part of your graduate education to meet the demands of the job market?

I think both academics and non-academics would benefit from training in how to manage both people and projects. No matter where you end up, chances are you will have to manage one or both, and it's a skill that is surprisingly hard to master on the fly.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

Oh yes, it's very satisfying to work at the

intersection of science, policy, and politics. I love that I can combine both substantive work on emerging issues like offshore wind with more in-the-moment reactions to Congressional action (or inaction) and current events. I also enjoy that communication and outreach are integral parts of the job, and that there's lots of room for creativity.

The aspect of the job I like the least is that many policymakers in Washington, DC, see ocean issues as technical and obscure. It's remarkable how often people forget about 71% of the planet and the source of over half our oxygen. I often joke that part of my job is to jump into other people's policy conversations and yell "don't forget the ocean!"

LESLIE M. SMITH | Communications Consultant, Your Ocean Consulting LLC (lsmith@oceanleadership.org)

Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I earned my PhD in oceanography from the University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Oceanography in 2011.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

I left academia a few days after I defended my dissertation and moved to Washington, DC, for an internship.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

A few months prior to my defense I began looking for jobs on different listservs. I had been advised by a mentor to look for people doing the job I wanted to do and then to ask them how they got there. However, I did not see anyone doing the job that I wanted to do—to work in science communications and also stay connected to science.

I applied for several communications jobs, but as a scientist without any concrete communications experience, I was not even getting to the interview stage. I

also wrote a postdoc proposal that did not get funded. I ultimately landed a communications internship with the Ocean Observatories Initiative in Washington, DC, that was specifically looking for a PhD student or a recent graduate. My intent was to learn more about science communications and gain the experience needed to be more marketable for other jobs. What I ended up getting out of it was an idea of and the foundation for a career of my own design—running my own science communications company.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

Besides my internship, this has been my only job. I formed my company in June 2011 and that has been my source of employment ever since.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am a freelance science communications consultant. I operate my own consulting company—Your Ocean Consulting

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

If you know for sure that you want to go into policy, don't do a PhD. It's not necessary—first-hand experience in the policy trenches is more valued. If you have done a PhD, there are still plenty of opportunities in policy, but you must be an excellent writer and communicator. Having a strong, supportive network is so important to getting you through the inevitable tough times and setbacks. And don't worry if you don't have a specific career plan—work on developing valuable skills, and the opportunities will follow. 📍



LLC—from my home in Knoxville, Tennessee. Because I work on so many different projects with so many different types of tasks, the best way to distill what I do is to say that I tell stories. I tell the story of a researcher by designing his or her website. I tell the story of a program by developing an overall communications strategy for it and interacting with its stakeholders. I tell a project's story by analyzing data, conducting geospatial analysis, and writing a manuscript. Or I tell the story of a large, international, voluntary group of researchers who are passionate about a topic by helping them to find their common voice as I edit their multi-author reports.

I have always been interested in the intersection between science and its

diverse body of stakeholders. During my PhD, I was an NSF IGERT (Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship) fellow in a program focusing on interdisciplinary problem solving for coastal management issues. Among other amazing experiences, this fellowship gave me the opportunity to intern with Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse during his first term. My doctoral research focused on stakeholder engagement as well as on hypoxia in Narragansett Bay, which had direct implications for local upgrades to wastewater treatment facilities. This meant that several times a year I would meet with state and local managers about my research. As much as I could in graduate school, I also tried to find ways to tell a diverse audience about my research or about local impacts of climate change.

During the internship in Washington, DC, I began researching how to create my own company focused on science communications. We were just coming out of the Great Recession, and folks either did not have the money to hire an FTE or were stuck in a hiring freeze, but they still had work to do. I thought perhaps they could hire an hourly consultant.

My first opportunity came in an email from Nancy Rabalais at Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium. I had gone to sea with her as a student and she was wondering if she could hire me for sea duty again. I signed on, told her about my idea for the company and asked if it would be possible for her to pay my soon-to-be-created company instead of just paying me. That was my first contract, and my work with Nancy continues to this day. It also set the stage for how I would get all of my clients: (1) tell everyone about the business, (2) do good work so people want to keep you around, and (3) jump on every opportunity given to you.

Soon my internship also expanded to a contract, and word spread about my work so one project then led to another and another.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

I think it is critical for those communicating science to a broad audience of stakeholders to themselves have a deep understanding of that science and the scientific process. Having a PhD gives me the credibility of being an “expert” on the ocean, but more importantly I have the necessary background knowledge, so whether I am writing a brochure, designing a website, or planning a workshop, I know which components are important to glean from the materials provided. The scientists whose work I am translating can be confident that I will maintain the integrity of their work.

Is there any course or other training you would have liked to have had as part of your graduate education to meet the demands of the job market?

I am well trained for my current work in the sense that a lot of what grad school taught me was how to learn something new. Between fieldwork and lab work, I learned to think on my feet and troubleshoot issues as they arose. Additionally, I took a very diverse course load through my IGERT fellowship. I also purposefully took courses to develop certain skill sets

like MATLAB and GIS. These courses not only taught me about these powerful software tools, but about how to learn new software and how to search for answers when I didn’t know how to do something.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

I love my job. I feel like I am making a difference. I am always happy to go to work. I love that every day I do something different and engage a different part of my brain. I can be an oceanographer, a science communicator, a web developer, a community engagement manager, a graphic designer, a technical writer—whatever a project needs. I also love the work-life balance afforded by working from home. I have no set schedule and no set office space. This allows me the flexibility to take my two-year-old son to the doctor if he wakes up with a cold without any worry or stress. The flip side of this flexibility is that I often get to work before the sun comes up.

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

Look around you and find someone doing the job you want and ask them how they got there. If you don’t see anyone, make your own job. 📧

Check Out Our Career Profiles Page!

<https://tos.org/career-profiles>

In each issue, *Oceanography* magazine publishes “career profiles” of marine scientists who have pursued successful and fulfilling careers outside of academia.

These profiles are intended to advise ocean sciences graduate students about career options other than teaching and/or research in a university setting. They also include wisdom on how to go about the job search.

We have over 50 profiles of ocean scientists on our web page. Check them out!

Do you have suggestions on who to profile?

Please send their contact information to ekappel@geo-prose.com. Self-nominations are accepted.

