Science Societies

Science advocacy and leadership opportunities for graduate students

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Graduate students are an integral part of research institutions where they lead data collection, data analysis, and manuscript publication, and they are the future leaders of

our scientific community. As future leaders, they are responsible for communicating the current state of research and scientific understanding of agronomy, crop science, and soil science to the public and to policymakers. Relaying scientific findings and appealing for funding for research is vital to engage non-scientific members of Congress about current knowledge and future needs of our field. As a graduate student, you can start to get involved in **science policy** through numerous avenues supported by the Societies.

Can Graduate Students Become Involved in Science Policy?

The Societies have guidance on becoming involved in science policy on their **websites** , which outlines the Advocacy Toolkit, SEED Ambassador Program, Legislative Action Network, and Congressional Visits Day. The **Advocacy Toolkit** covers how to get involved in science policy and provides guidance on how to build congressional relationships and how to be an effective communicator in-person and on social media. The **Scientists Engaging and Educating Decision-makers (SEED) Ambassador leadership program** aims to develop "trusted relationships between Society members and members of Congress" during a year-long training program. The **Legislative Action Network** keeps Society members informed about upcoming policy issues or legislative actions. **Congressional Visits Day** (CVD) brings researchers, professionals, and students together to meet members of Congress to communicate the value of our science and impacts of research funding. For graduate student members, CVD is an especially impactful opportunity and can launch their involvement in science policy and provide an introduction on how to communicate with policymakers. Graduate students who have gained policy experience also may have the opportunity to be appointed to one of the Societies' three science policy committees, where they directly provide input on policy decisions being made and help to write **comments and statements** on behalf of the Societies.



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Congressional Visits Day

Why Congressional Visits Day Is Important for Graduate Students

It is important to learn how to communicate why your research is broadly important and should be funded. For example, if a research project is fertilizer management in field crops such as corn, wheat, and sorghum, it can help local farmers by improving economic return. Also, a project like fertilizer management reduces greenhouse gas emissions from agricultural activities, so it can help alleviate the effects of climate change; therefore that research is globally important. Graduate students can make a compelling story to communicate with staff members and/or members of Congress. It is important because in most cases, the staff and members of Congress may not be able to understand scientific jargon specific to your field.

How and When to Apply

Each year, the application for the CVD Award opens in November. This is a self-nomination process where interested graduate students can nominate themself by providing information such as why they are interested in CVD, prior experience related to advocacy, and experience related to communicating science/research to a non-academic audience. Based on the application, several science advocates get selected to attend CVD, which is generally announced in January.

How to Prepare

The CVD meetings are teamwork based, which require many interpersonal skills like communication, active listening, flexibility, and responsibility. The new members of each team are paired to interact with a team of fellow advocates. It gives an opportunity for new members to understand the advocacy goals and get to know experiences from past meetings. The Societies provide a series of training before the CVD meetings, which includes advocacy and communication training, and presentations from invited speakers. For example, in 2022, there were three training webinars to prepare participants for the congressional meetings. These webinars gave an overview of the importance of USDA research funding, the budget system, meeting tips, and information about the offices we were scheduled to meet with. Additionally, a digital background packet was provided to each participant with detailed information about guidelines before, after, and during the meetings along with information on USDA funds to support secure and sustainable agriculture.

What to Expect During Congressional Visits Day



Molly McIlquham, Holly Lane, and Lance Merrick meet with Rep. Newhouse during the 2022 Congressional Visits Day.

Graduate students discuss their research and the local and global impact of their work with their designated teams. The teams are formed by state and consist of researchers within the fields of agronomy, crops, and soils and meet with congressional members and staff. For example, Team Texas discussed the impact of USDA-funded research programs to solve the current and emerging agricultural problems such as increased fertilizer price, degrading soil quality, low supply and usage of improved seed varieties, and increased incidence of disease and pest in the crops. These discussions are especially important for graduate students to be involved in as they can share the most up-to-date research they are working on for their dissertations.

The experience of CVD can be particularly meaningful for international graduate students to advance their understanding of how the U.S. government allocates funding and prioritizes research. Not only that, but international graduate students have the opportunity to share information about how the government in their home country approaches science policy. The congressional staff members are generally eager to learn more about the conditions for international graduate students in the U.S., especially since international students greatly contribute to the large diversity within our research institutions.

How to Stay Connected After Congressional Visits Day

It is good practice to keep in touch with the local congressional office you are connected with during CVD by phone calls and emails. These phone calls and emails

can be aimed at expressing your opinion about various bills and to voice your support/displeasure about certain topics. Other ways to stay connected are to get involved with local extension activities, local farmers, or conservation and land trust programs. Staying involved with these outside agencies can allow you to learn about the current science issues faced by community members and to think critically about how your own research can impact these challenges.



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