Science Societies

2020 SEED Ambassador Award: Growing advocacy leaders

By Julie McClure

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SEED Ambassador

Scientists Engaging and Educating Decision-makers



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Interacting with Congress through form emails has been the norm since the early 2000s. Form emails are a quick and easy way for advocates to let congressional offices know how they feel about an issue. While this method of advocacy can give policymakers a general sense of what issues are important to constituents, research shows that it's not very useful in helping them develop meaningful policies. A form email rarely includes the local impacts or personal context that members and staff have said are the most powerful in helping them make policy decisions. So what is a better way to engage?

Surveys of congressional staff consistently show that the most powerful form of advocacy is in-person meetings with constituents. However, that's a pretty high bar. How many people feel comfortable and prepared enough to schedule a meeting with a member of Congress or their staff, especially if they've never done it before? What if there were a way to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence to participate in face-to-face advocacy?

Transforming Novice Advocates into Trusted Resources for Policymakers

Last summer, the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Science Policy Office launched a new advocacy program to do just that. The Scientists Engaging and Educating Decision-makers (SEED) Ambassador Award is an immersive advocacy leadership program designed to

transform a novice advocate into a trusted resource to policymakers. The program gives advocates step-by-step instructions on how to develop strong relationships with members of Congress and their staff. Recipients of the SEED Ambassador Award will be part of a small class of Society leaders who get personalized, hands-on training to successfully engage with federal, state, and local policymakers.

A major part of the program is gaining the knowledge and skills to become advocacy leaders. SEED Ambassador Award recipients will take part in regular, interactive webinars with the Science Policy Office staff and invited speakers focused on a variety of advocacy strategies. Ambassadors will gain an in-depth understanding of the policy process, empowering them to know the who, when, and how to make the biggest impact.

The program focuses on providing Ambassadors with advocacy "best practices," which are based on feedback that comes directly from congressional staff. 2019 SEED Ambassador Jason de Koff, at Tennessee State University, found this information particularly helpful. "Using guest speakers and survey data from legislative staffers really helps us target our message to have the greatest potential impact."

During the final months of the program, SEED Ambassadors will work with the Science Policy Office staff to develop and carry out advocacy-related activities within their university, congressional district, or state. Possible activities include inviting your member of Congress to do a lab/field tour, attending a town hall meeting, organizing a department-wide email campaign, or writing an op-ed in your local paper. These are just a few ideas, and Ambassadors are encouraged to develop their own plans based on what they learn and what they are passionate about.

Undeterred 2019 Classes Engages Policymakers during Pandemic

The 2019 class of Ambassadors faced the unusual challenge of trying to engage with policymakers in the middle of a global pandemic that significantly limited the opportunities for in-person meetings. Undeterred, they got creative and worked to identify virtual advocacy opportunities like telephone town halls and virtual site tours.

For example, two Ambassadors, Mark McDonald, at Texas A&M University, and Spencer Moller, at the University of Delaware, worked together to organize a virtual presentation on advocacy specifically tailored to grad students. “[Spencer and I] met with the University of Delaware Plant and Soil Science graduate students to discuss the basics of advocacy and how you can be involved even during these 'socially distant' times including: emails, social media engagement, and discussions with your peers about graduate student priorities,” McDonald says. “[We] encouraged the students to participate in whatever way they can.”

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