

## Mind the Gap, Part I: There's No Effective Engagement Without Effective Stakeholders

GSA Speaking of Geoscience

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In the science policy world, we often talk about “bridging the gap between science and society.” Implicit is that we are talking about knowledge transfer – the migration and translation of science information across the structural and conceptual boundaries separating it from politics. This skill of being able to effectively communicate and contextualize science for policy makers is perpetually important. In the August 2019 issue of *GSA Today*, I discuss how as scientists we are trained to found our opinions on hard and fast facts and communicate them as such, yet to be effective science policy advocates, we need to pitch policy messages in the context of shared values.

This past April, while spending two weeks on Capitol Hill on behalf of GSA, I observed another type of gap at the science-policy nexus. If you don't give it proper attention, this gap can also limit your effectiveness and influence.

### **Picture This**

We scientists arrive in Washington, D.C., often taking the Metro to Capitol Hill, with our science tucked in bags and ready to pull out for discussion with legislative staff. We're ready to unpack scientific complexities, discover shared values, and persuade with our data. However, when we get to the Capitol Hill Metro stops, if we don't “mind the gap” – that proverbial distance between the train door and the station platform – we can trip and fall, possibly hurting ourselves and our cause.

London Tube signage “Mind the Gap” – Credit: clipart.com

What is this metaphorical gap? To be effective stakeholders, we need to know how the policymaking system works and how policymakers think about and manage issues, both strategically and tactically. And here's the good news: this knowledge gap is easy to remedy.

### **Attitude is Everything**

Strategically, we must not only bridge from facts to shared values, but also to influencing attitudes. Here's an important truism worth committing to memory: *public policies reflect attitudes on a public issue*. That's right, attitudes, a settled way of thinking or feeling about a fact or state, often based on values.

Let's dive a little deeper. Policies are the attitudes and actions taken toward issues, which in the context of public policy, are problems or events that need government attention. Policies are statements-of-intent. They are developed into principles, ideas, or plans to guide decisions and set directions toward actions that achieve desired outcomes on the issue of concern. For a geoscience example, natural hazards and climate change are issues. Mitigating natural hazards and developing strategies for climate change adaptation are policies. To be an effective science policy advocate, you'll likely need to do more than present your hazard or climate science to policymakers and agree upon your shared values for protecting public health, property, economies, and the environment. You will need to advocate for, create, or change attitudes and intent toward taking action. Changed attitudes can lead to new or improved policy development, which can lead to new laws embodied in legislative acts. So, let's get in a Capitol Hill frame of mind.

### **Policy Literacy 1.0**

Tactically, as we cross this bridge from presenting facts to finding shared values to influencing attitudes, we must take specific, tangible steps within the established procedures of the legislative process. How do we “mind the gap” in our knowledge of the legislative process and effectively engage with Congress?

GSA offers an annual training program in Washington, D.C., Congressional Visits Day (CVD), to learn about and experience the federal legislative process. Through CVD, you can receive training on the organization and structure of Congress, be briefed on current issues and legislation, learn strategies to build relationships between scientists and policy makers, and build expertise on conducting effective Hill visits.

GSA also identifies target issues and positions important to the geoscience community. During CVDs, participants discuss a GSA-planned “ask” or message with congressional members and their staffers. Asks can include requesting support for legislation, increasing or maintaining the budgets for funding geoscience research, or offering expertise to an office as a future resource for members and their staff. See GSA Science Communication Fellow Sarah Derouin’s August 2019 *GSA Today* article, ‘Congressional Visits and the Power of a Good “Ask.”’

CVDs offer you an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of how Congress works and your understanding of science policy engagement with the benefit of the background research – and the crafting of the ask – done for you by GSA. Through this lived experience, you might even have some of your own values or assumptions challenged or discover a new and meaningful role, well-suited to your specific interests and science communication skills sets. To learn more about potential roles for connecting science with policy, see the 15 April 2019 *Geosphere* article, “What perceptions to scientists have about their potential role in connecting science with policy?” here.

Whether you engage in this formal GSA training or not, once you are ready to change attitudes you have become a stakeholder. You have an interest in your value and effectiveness as a science advocate and a policy influencer. And, you will need an action plan to leverage your efforts for the best chance of success.

In my next blog, I discuss how to uncover some of the basics of Capitol Hill day-to-day operations and walk you through a primer on how Congress constructs and deliberates about issues. Presenting your case within the timeline and lingo of Congress (“HillSpeak”) can greatly enhance your ability to effectively engage with policymakers and their staff, and be an effective and valued stakeholder.

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