Why You Should Consider Applying for the AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellowship

Society for Linguistic Anthropology
Laura M Ahearn (AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow)

Are you about to complete your PhD and want to do something other than become an adjunct? Or are you perhaps safely tenured but want to make a contribution in government rather than in academia? (“Ask not what your country can do for you…”) Or maybe you’re just curious and would like to find out what a very different work environment would be like?

Whether you’re at the early, mid-, or late-career stage, an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science & Technology Policy...
Fellowship might turn out to be the perfect way for you to apply your analytical and research skills outside of a university setting. The AAAS S&T Fellowship takes PhDs from many different fields, places them in federal agencies, congressional offices and federal courts in Washington, DC, and provides them with a great deal of professional development in order for them to become more savvy about policy issues. The AAAS Fellowship could end up being just a short and illuminating detour along a lengthy and productive academic career path, or it could send you off in a different direction away from academia. (AAAS Fellows are said to be a sort of high-level policy wonk community in Washington, DC.) Whatever you end up doing after the fellowship, you are likely to emerge from the experience with knowledge that will benefit you in your chosen career.

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While the vast majority of my "fellow Fellows" are biologists, physicists, chemists, engineers, or some other type of non-social-scientist, AAAS has repeatedly stated that they would like to attract more social scientist applicants, so I would strongly encourage more linguistic anthropologists to apply. In fact, there will be an online chat session specifically directed at social scientists on August 20 at 2 pm. Here is the link: http://www.aaas.org/news/enhancing-policy-transforming-careers-online-chat-series-st-policy-fellows. The session will be recorded and archived, so you'll be able to access it afterwards if you miss it.

How does the application process work? You must have your PhD completed by the application deadline (November 1). The application process requires a candidate’s statement of 1,000 words and a shorter essay of 500 words describing your extracurricular activities. A CV of five pages maximum is also required, along with three references. Other details about the application process can be found here. If you make the first cut, you will be asked to write a sample policy memo, which you will then discuss at a semifinalist interview via Skype in February or March. And if you make it to the finalist stage, you will be invited to Washington, DC for a week in April to conduct interviews at various agencies where you might receive a placement.

There are seven different programmatic areas for AAAS S&T Fellowships, with a majority of fellows in the executive branch in one of the following four tracks:

- **Diplomacy, Security, and Development**—Agencies participating in this track include the Department of State, US Agency for International Development, the Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Foreign Agricultural Service of the Department of Agriculture. (You can easily avoid intelligence-related placements if you prefer; this is what I did.)

- **Energy, Environment, and Agriculture**—Agencies participating in this track include the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Department of Energy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Science Foundation, the US Geological Survey, and the Department of Agriculture.

- **Health, Education, and Human Services**—Agencies participating in this track include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Agriculture.

- **Big Data and Analytics**—Placements in this track can be in any federal agency that partners with AAAS.

You are allowed to apply in up to two of these tracks, and you are allowed to apply again if you do not get accepted the first time you apply. See this page for more information about each area.

What Fellows end up doing during their fellowship will vary. My own experience has been extremely interesting, though not without some challenges. The AAAS interview week alone was an amazing ethnographic experience. I had interviews at 14 or 15 different offices across the Department of State and USAID. Each one was so different from the last in terms of its tenor, operating procedures, and receptivity to anthropology. I ended up in USAID's Global Development Lab, helping to run a different (that is, non-AAAS) fellowship program: the Research and Innovation Fellowship program. I managed the monitoring and evaluation component for this program's six partner universities and conducted a Lab-wide survey along with a number of interviews during the strategic planning and reorganization process.

Since the Research and Innovation Fellowship program is being phased out as part of that reorganization process, I have now transferred to USAID's Center of Excellence for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. As Senior Learning Advisor, I help set the research and learning agenda for the Center, especially for the Cross-Sectoral Programs Division. Since this team advocates taking a systems-based and political economy approach to development, the members have been very receptive to incorporating insights from anthropology as well.

In sum, the AAAS S&T Policy Fellowship has been a fascinating experience, and I have learned a great deal. I have found the Fellowship to be a wonderful opportunity for learning exciting new skills through numerous professional development events, and I have met all sorts of wonderful new people in every field and at every level both inside and outside of the government.

I encourage others at any stage of their career to try it out!
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