

A young physicist's trek to Capitol Hill

By EliseAnne C. Koskelo

For a sophomore physics major who dreams of one day making a positive impact on society, when the SPS Congressional Visits Day program was announced this winter, I found it to be an opportunity that I could not pass up. I am a native New Mexican who currently studies physics at Pomona College in Claremont, CA. My academic interests lie mainly in applied physics and engineering, but I also hold a strong passion for architecture, running, and hiking. I applied to participate in the Society of Physics Students Congressional Visits Day because I see effective science communication as a vital part of any researchers' contribution to the field and to society. CVD was an excellent chance for me to advocate for improvements in science education, diversity, and clean energy. In the future, I aspire to be a university professor in addition to a scientific advisor for the United Nations. I found CVD to be a valuable introduction into learning about the intersection between physics and policy making.

While I am only one of two members of our actual SPS Chapter at Pomona College, I am a member of an extremely involved physics and astronomy department whose out-of-class events range from mini-"Olympics" challenges with the math department to planning group camping trips in Joshua Tree, to co-hosting this year's CuWIP@SoCal with Cal Poly Pomona and Harvey Mudd College. One of the reasons I became a physics major was for this welcoming and collaborative community. I currently serve as one of the physics department liaisons and one of my motivations in attending SPS CVD was to broaden my horizons outside of Pomona, reaching out to the larger physics community of SPS.

Each day I have discovered that college offers the opportunity to learn something new about the world and about yourself. For me, SPS CVD allowed me to learn about policy-making and implementation in the US, first-hand. I am also very fortunate to have met new friends, fellow SPS members from across the country, and to have been able to advocate for issues that were important to me, such as the preservation of our environment, and women and minorities' presence in physics.

One week before we headed to Capitol Hill, our Congressional Visits "Team" participated in a webinar with professionals from SPS and from the American Institute of Physics to train us about speaking to congressmen and staffers as constituents who have held lifelong interests in science. Dr. Bethany Johns of AIP highlighted advocating to congressmen by emphasizing our own personal stories and issues that we cared most about. For me, I went in to the Congressional Visits Day stressing the need for transition to a renewable energy industry in New Mexico and in



After our congressional meetings, we got to explore around Capitol Hill and outside the Supreme Court

the United States. I also planned to discuss the potential for a scholarship program for high school seniors, not always targeted for such awards, to pursue degrees in science and engineering.

Our trip to Washington was quite an adventure, from a day of Accelerated Intro Lobbying 101 to a snow storm of four inches on Capitol Hill on the day of our scheduled visits. I found the training day to be super engaging as we heard from PhD physicists who had become congressional staffers about their career paths and experience working on Capitol Hill as well as what makes successful lobbying. The main takeaway for the day was that if you want to influence congressional policy via lobbying, you need to speak with the staffers and/or congressmen with a clear ask, making use of a follow-up conversation in the following days or months. That is, successful lobbying requires persistence.

On Wednesday morning, the day of our congressional visits, we made the trek from Union Station through the heavily falling snow to the Senate Building, an optimistic group despite the impending threat of a possible closure of the federal government. While the federal government was officially declared closed, we got to witness first-hand, the hustle and bustle of staffers and senators who continued business as usual despite the unusual weather. Although many of my meetings were cancelled, one of my favorite parts of the trip was being proactive and running from senate office to senate office, introducing myself to the chiefs of staff and making impromptu pitches for renewable energy and diversity in STEM. I was fortunate to speak with both chiefs of staff for Sen. Heinrich and Sen. Udall of New Mexico and to meet fellow constituents from the salmon fishing and pharmaceuticals industries. This brand of lobbying was a heart-warming experience as I got to share my love for my home state with fellow New Mexicans while trying to make a difference in the future of our government and our society. Speaking with the chiefs of staff, I learned more about the different policies of New Mexico's senators, and found myself leaving the program with more faith for the future, as NM makes strides in solar energy and wind energy in the Eastern part and Southern portions of the state.



Congressional Visits Day in Hart Senate Building

Another perk of the program was teaming up with fellow SPS CVD participants. I had a great time attending meetings with congressional staffers and senators from Alaska under the leadership of fellow SPS participant Riley Troyer, learning about his interest in renewable energy and energy efficiency in the state. I found that the most successful meetings were those where we, as students, related the issues for which we were advocating back to our own experiences whether that be learning physics in high school or conducting research at a university or a national lab.

I came away from SPS CVD with a greater understanding of policy-making as well as the different pathways in physics that lead to becoming a policy-maker. Through these days on Capitol Hill, I discovered for myself, that in the future, I plan to focus on scientific research and eventually teaching as a professor, but I finished the program with a reinforced appreciation of the importance

of advocacy in our roles as physicists. I am very glad to have connected with four other SPS members across the country and to have learned about their academic interests and to have shared meals relaying our communal interests in physics, literature, policy, and philosophy. Overall, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in SPS and I definitely plan to advocate for greater involvement of my college department in SPS in the future!