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## My year as a fed

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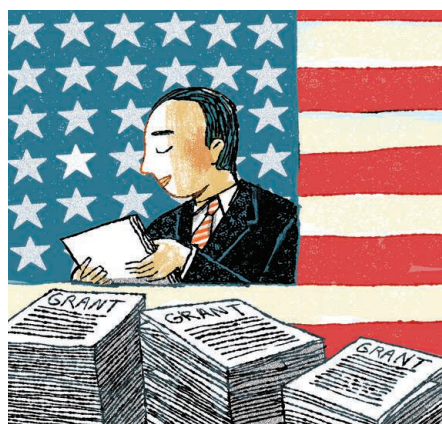
# My year as a fed

A friend had warned me that the entire Washington, D.C., region is an ARE (Acronym Rich Environment). On the first day of my 1-year rotation as an NSF (National Science Foundation) program director, I was finding out just how true that was. After the NEW (New Employee Workshop), I felt my eyes glaze over (perhaps blurred by tears) as I scanned several pages of “Common Acronyms of NSF.” What had I gotten myself into?

In my regular life as a professor and ichthyologist, I discovered new species in far-off tropical countries and taught classes to enraptured masses. (OK, maybe indifferent flocks, but it was fulfilling nonetheless.) Now, I was about to leave that behind to spend a year allocating grant funding to other people. Did I really want to learn acronyms and push papers for the federal government? I reminded myself what I had said during my interview: I wanted to give back to NSF, which had been so good to me; I wanted to learn how the system worked; and I wanted to see my field from the top.

My rotation ended a few months ago, and I'm now happily back at my university. But I wouldn't say that I'm back where I started. I've returned to my academic work with a new, reinvigorated perspective on what it means to be a scientist, how our government funding agencies support us, and why we need to support them. Despite the challenge of learning fed-speak and the seemingly endless training, I found that I actually liked learning how the proverbial sausage was made—even though it wasn't always pretty.

I gained the greatest insights from running grant review panels made up of scientists we brought in to help determine which proposals most deserved support. These panels were intellectually stimulating, exhilarating, and exhausting. In the long hours we spent debating the merits, methods, and minutiae of each proposal, I learned a great deal about how scientists read, understand, and evaluate the work of others. One epiphany was that many of the most successful grant writers were those who could not only explain what they were going to do and why, but could also get a panelist excited enough to advocate for their work. I realize now that *everything* I do should have a “hook” to reel people in. To convince others that a project is interesting and



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important, I need to articulate why I am excited about it.

Once we picked the top proposals, I had to get them funded. That forced me into a new role of advocating for someone else's science. I needed to justify all of my funding decisions to higher-ups so that those higher-ups could defend their program decisions to people even higher up, and so on. I valued being part of this long unbroken chain that ultimately explains why it is worth supporting cutting-edge science to the nonscientists overseeing federal funding: Congress and the president. I found the process inspiring, even if I was sometimes a little jealous of the superb proposals I found myself promoting.

Although the ARE at NSF was hard to get used to at first, I'm glad I ventured outside my comfort zone. Now I know how much work goes into not only doing good science, but also funding it. Coming back to my home institution, I realized that my science advocacy shouldn't end with my federal employment. Just as it was my role as a rotator to be the voice of the community inside the walls of NSF, on the outside I can pull back the curtain a bit for those who want to know more about the granting process by giving seminars or one-on-one advice. I have also become an advocate for supporting funding agencies more generously so that they can support deserving scientists. I never thought I'd be holding up signs at a march defending science or going on the offensive protecting funding agencies using social media, but I can't shake my newfound understanding of the need to promote the interests of science. By bridging the knowledge gaps between government and academia, we can ensure that scientists get the support we need. ■

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