Geo-CVD 2014

Deborah Weiser, a graduate student at UCLA, represented the Seismological Society of America at the 2014 Geosciences Congressional Visits Day (Geo-CVD), 16–17 September 2014, in Washington, D.C. Weiser’s experience was made possible through a 2014 Geo-CVD Student Travel Grant, and her account is published below.

SSA is grateful to James Lewkowicz of Weston Geophysical Corp. for generous support of Geosciences Congressional Visits Day during 2013–2014. SSA has established the Student Travel Fund for Geosciences Congressional Visits Day thanks to an initial donation from SSA Government Relations Committee Co-chair Woody Savage. SSA members are invited to contribute to the Geo-CVD Support Fund to ensure that students have future opportunities to participate in this experience.

The Geo-CVD Travel Grant is open to graduate students who are interested in the intersection of geoscience and public policy. Watch the SSA web site for information about how and when to apply for the 2015 grant.

LESSONS I LEARNED WHILE ATTENDING THE 2014 GEOSCIENCES CONGRESSIONAL VISITS DAY

As a UCLA graduate student studying induced seismicity in California, it is easy to lose sight of what goes on in Washington, D.C., specifically with regard to science funding. After participating in the 2014 Geosciences Congressional Visits Day (Geo-CVD), thanks to generous funding from SSA, I received a firsthand view of our complicated legislative process and how one person actually can make a difference.

Geo-CVD spans two days, the first of which includes preparatory training for the second day of meetings with congressional staffers. During the training, we were given overviews of the budget and appropriations process. Previously, I had assumed that meeting with members of the House and Senate authorizing committees, where the budgets are discussed, would be of the utmost importance. I learned that the appropriations process, akin to an IOU, is just as critical as that of the budget, in which funds are disbursed. During the training, we were given an overview of how Congress works, as well as a breakdown of current geosciences bills such as the Tsunami Warning and Education Act (TWEA), a critical mineral policy act, and a reauthorization bill for the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program (NEHRP).

The most critical component of our training covered how to have a congressional meeting. First and foremost, always go into a meeting with an “ask.” The purpose of “The Ask” is to convey information in a clear manner, so the staffer or member of congress will remember your points. Through this initial meeting, and subsequent brief follow-ups, you will begin to build a relationship with that office. This year, our ask was for the member of congress to support strong federal investments in geoscience research. We worked to convey a message that strong and sustained federal investments in geosciences will promote innovation, enhance public health and safety, advance economic and national security, and strengthen our global competitiveness. To drive home this message, we shared personal examples of how we have benefited from federal geoscience funding, explained our research so they could see how federal science dollars are used, and gave examples that were relevant to the member’s district or home state. Other useful tips included making it personal (share brief stories that help illustrate your point); treating the meeting like a first date (be aware of body language; don’t overshare; be formal); be specific (what line items in which bills do you want them to support?); offer
yourself as a scientific resource; leave a few detailed handouts behind (this will allow you to keep the conversation general, yet still leave them with important details to reference later); and follow up!

When the morning arrived, I did what geology graduate students rarely do: I put on a suit. I walked the few short blocks to Capitol Hill and went into one of the three Senate office buildings. (As a quick aside, the rocks used in the hallways of the Senate and House office buildings are stunning!) My first meeting of the day was unlike the rest. Along with about 25 other visitors to D.C., I attended a constituents’ coffee with Sen. Patty Murray, D-WA. It was interesting to hear her viewpoints on current issues, including that day’s votes on the federal budget and arming anti-ISIS activists. The meeting helped to get my head in the right space for the barrage of meetings we had the rest of the day. It was also exciting to meet a multiple-term senator from the state in which I grew up.

The structure of Visits Day involved breaking up the attendees into small groups by home state to allow a more efficient and effective meeting schedule. My group included John Williams (a professor emeritus from San Jose State University) and Elizabeth Duffy (SSA’s DC Congressional Affairs Liaison, who skillfully crafted our meeting schedule and helped us throughout the training and meeting days). Our group met with staffers from the two California senators, the two Washington State senators, and three representatives from California. In each meeting, I focused on discussing my research on induced seismicity (drawing connections to the member’s state) and natural hazards education and mitigation. I also explained where my (and other students’) funding comes from and what types of federally funded databases and tools I use. At the end of each meeting, we left the staffer(s) with concise handouts, including a few figures I put together about disaster recovery and induced seismicity, as well as a one-page personal fact sheet detailing my research and areas of expertise.

Our meetings varied greatly—some were held in hallways; some of the staffers knew about our topics in great detail, others did not; and the duration lasted from about 15 minutes to almost an hour. I was impressed with the level of knowledge of the staff members with whom we met. Two of them discussed the member’s concern about induced seismicity before I even opened my mouth. However, in each meeting, we made sure to strongly state our Ask and support it with personal comments and anecdotes. We ended each meeting with a summary of our message and a promise to follow up.

A few weeks after my return from D.C., I sent follow-up emails to each staff member we met. Although the emails were brief, I made it a point to mention something specific we had covered in our meeting. Among the responses I received, one staff member mentioned that the congresswoman had since signed a letter supporting earthquake early warning.

When reflecting on my time in D.C. and Geo-CVD, I am proud of the meetings I had and of the knowledge that I was able to share and gain. However, I am left with a nagging sense that my work—that our work—is incomplete. With the rapid turnover rates of Hill staffers and congressional representatives, it is critical that geoscientists continue the discussion started by the Geo-CVD process. Consider attending future Geo-CVDs, scheduling a meeting with your local representative, or sending letters or emails to your elected officials. Students, I especially implore you to be active advocates for yourselves! Although science funding does not grow on trees, I urge you to take a few moments to engage in the political process and sow a few seeds of support with your elected representatives.

Deborah Weiser
University of California Los Angeles
dweiser@ucla.edu