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# Finding the Right Fit: How to Survive STPF Legislative Placement Interviews

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*Note: This post is intended to help incoming legislative branch fellows prepare for interviews with congressional offices.*

Perhaps it is your first job out of grad school or maybe you are contemplating switching to a new career in science policy—a congressional fellowship can be both an exciting and a scary transition. Not to mention moving to D.C. while having absolutely no idea what you will be working on! Luckily, AAAS has put together a great survival guide that contains a comprehensive list of questions to ask and things to consider. To complement that, here are some tips for answering interview questions and several often overlooked questions that fellows should be sure to ask each office.

### Questions to watch out for

#### 1. *Can you tell us about your research?*

This is a trick question. If you find yourself reciting the introduction of your dissertation, STOP, and step away from the dissertation. The interviewer is actually looking for how well you can communicate a highly technical topic and how your interests and experiences align with those of the office. So be brief and make sure you can describe your research in two sentences: what was the broad problem you were trying to solve and what was your contribution. Then quickly tie your work to

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specific issues or actions that the office is engaged in such as the health care debate, funding for research and development, climate change legislation, etc.

## *2. Where do you see yourself in five years?*

Your mentor wants you to have a positive experience and feel that the year has been worthwhile, so don't be afraid to be specific about your aspirations. And if you honestly don't know, let them know about areas you are interested in exploring. Whether it is industry, government or academia, good mentors will make sure to pass along good opportunities your way—but only if they know what you are looking for.

### **Questions you should ask**

#### *1. Are there other types of fellows in the office?*

As great as the AAAS network is, there are tons of other fellowship programs on Capitol Hill in areas such as defense, legal and foreign policy. These fellowships bring in talented people from across government and industry. For instance, Brookings congressional fellows have a minimum of seven years of private management experience or are government employees who hold advanced degrees. Executive branch agencies can also assign detailees who provide policy expertise to congressional offices. The point is, being in an office that has fellows from other programs can open new doors and lead to deeper, more meaningful connections with industry and government.

#### *2. Which organizations (think tanks, agencies, companies, universities, etc.) does the office most regularly interact with?*

Your interviewer might first answer by saying that they meet with all sorts of groups and it varies by topic. But probe a little deeper and you will find that each office will have a core group of organizations that they interact with on a regular basis. This could be because of committee assignments, constituent connections, policy interest, or a myriad of other reasons. Once you have an idea of which organizations these are, do some background research and draw a mental map of how everyone is connected. Then ask yourself if this network supports what you want to do or where you want to go.

#### *3. How much autonomy do fellows have to pursue personal areas of interest?*

In the office I was placed in, we called this the "white-nosed bat." This is not a real animal but a special pet project that each person in the office can set aside time to work on. Policy priorities can change on a dime—or a tweet—and it is very common to find yourself working on policy areas that are out of your comfort zone. Other times, fellows may find that their policy portfolios are so broad that it can be difficult to cobble together enough time to go deep on topics of interests. Whatever the case may be, if you have a policy area that you want time to explore, make sure the office understands and is open to giving you the flexibility to pursue your own white-nosed bat.

#### *4. What has the office done in the past to help fellows transition to positions after the fellowship?*

It's no secret that congressional fellows have a very limited term in the office and that everyone will eventually be on the lookout for the next big step, so why beat around the bush? Find out what your mentor or office has done to help fellows in the past. For instance, your interviewer might mention

relationships that the office has with companies in the district or state and the potential for scheduling future networking opportunities. Some members of congress have even been known to pick up the phone to tell a prospective employer how wonderful their congressional fellow was!

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