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## **7 Tips for the AAAS STPF Finalist Interview Week**

Thursday, April 1, 2021

### **Author(s)**

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Congratulations! You survived the semi-finalist round of interviews for the AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowship (STPF), and you are now a finalist.

For STPF finalists, interviewing in Washington is an exciting and exhausting experience. With the COVID-19 pandemic forcing interviews online, many applicants in the 2020 cohort didn't know what to expect.

How different was it? Well, I was (un)fortunate enough to experience both so I can tell you firsthand. In 2019, I flew to DC as a AAAS STPF finalist. Overall, it was a great and memorable experience. However, I made a difficult decision to not leave my current position for the fellowship so I waited a

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year. In 2020, I did it all over again, but virtually.

Here is a comparison of my PRE- and During-COVID experience with the STPF Finalist Interview week, with several tips to help you get the most out of this fun, but challenging week.

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## **Pre-COVID**

I flew into DC in April of 2019. Before the week officially started, I reviewed my schedule, interview locations, and other open positions I may be interested in. The next day I put on my suit and then walked across town to reach the AAAS building and convene in their auditorium for Interview Week Orientation. Sitting there among a whole crowd of finalists, I listened to several hours of panels from different agencies and information on the upcoming week. Then we were released into the wilderness of DC Metro area to start our barrage of interviews.

## **During COVID**

After doing similar preparation for the week, I woke up early morning on the West coast, turned on my computer, and listened to the webinar presentation while still in my pajamas. Eventually, as the presentations winded down, I put on my suit and tie and mentally prepared myself for interviews.

### **Tip #1: Don't compare how many interviews you received to others.**

In conversations with other finalists, I discovered some had 15-20 interviews while others had 5 (I had 10). This number really means nothing- it does NOT mean you are less desirable. It mostly depends on what interests you highlighted in your application and whether the offices managed to get to you in the pile of resumes.

### **Tip #2 Review open positions and prepare emails early to contact them.**

You can request interviews with offices that didn't schedule you. You are not supposed to contact offices before a certain time on the first day. However, there is nothing wrong with preparing emails beforehand and having them ready to go the moment it's okay to send.

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## **PRE-COVID (cont.)**

Progressing through the week, I would race across town from office to office to interview. This gave me a lay of the land, a rough idea of commute, and a general vibe of each office. As my fellow finalists and I found out, we can only do so many interviews because of physical limitations of time and space, not to mention general exhaustion.

## **During COVID (cont.)**

Progressing through the week, I would race from Zoom link to Teams meeting as I sat in my shirt, tie,

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jacket, and sweatpants.

This time, not having to race across town, I reached out and fit more interviews into my schedule. However, even though physical exhaustion may not have been an issue, mental exhaustion was still a factor

### **Tip #3: More interviews are possible virtually but more ? better**

I was not nearly as fresh and alert for interviews later in the day interviews, especially after a stacked day. This is true for in-person interviews too, but the adrenaline of running around across town keeps you going while clicking the next link in your email might not.

### **Tip #4: Check meeting links ahead of time**

Find out what video application the different offices use. Check the links they send work ahead of time. Interviews tend to go by fast so it's courteous to start on time.

### **Tip #5: Interview them too!**

Offices want fellows and they want you! It's important for you to determine if you're a good fit for their mentorship style, work-life balance, etc. Investigate! This will also make you seem more interested in the position.

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## **PRE-COVID (cont.)**

During the evenings, I went to planned social get-togethers and happy hours where I made friends and compared notes on the week. We laughed, we drank, and we later took pictures on top of our hotel. I am still friends with some of the people I met that first interview week.

## **During COVID (cont.)**

After interviews, I joined another online conference, but this time it was more informal, and drinks were encouraged. Breakout rooms were formed to get to know people in smaller groups and so more people can interact at once. I met some interesting people but screen fatigue was no joke and conversations can only be so natural in a group through a screen. However, I made note of some people I met in passing and reached out to them to meet one-on-one some other time.

### **Tip #6: Don't feel bad for not being social online after a long day.**

Networking and being social is a big part of the fellowship. During interview week, it can be fun and informative learning about others' experiences. However, if you can't stand to look at a screen too

much more, maybe try to reach out to some people and set up one-on-one's some other time and socialize that way.

**Tip #7: Stay open-minded and have fun.**

As stressful as this whole process can be, remember that this also a great opportunity. You may be surprised at which offices initially reach out and who you meet. Keeping an optimistic and open mind will help you to make the best of the fellowship.

One of my fellow friends said: "Interview week is something that every fellow has to go through, but nobody wants to repeat." After doing it twice, I am inclined to agree. But, I'm happy I ended up at my current position. The interview week, placement process, and fellowship can be a different and difficult experience, but ultimately, it is worth it as you are being set on a path for success.

Good luck!

Image: Maciej Gonek, 2019 STPF Finalist Week

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**Source URL:** <https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/7-tips-aaas-stpf-finalist-interview-week>

**List of links present in page**