
5 Things to Do Before Starting your AAAS S&T Policy Fellowship

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By now, the incoming AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowship (STPF) cohort (aka the class of 2021-22) have survived virtual screening interviews, dozens of interviews with potential host offices, and agonized over placement assignments. Now should be the time to celebrate — but with new opportunities can come new anxiety. You might be wondering how you should prepare in the coming months prior to the start of the big STPF orientation in September.

Three of us current fellows gathered some advice from current and former fellows on what they did in the summer before moving to Washington DC (or onboarding virtually). Here are five tips to help you prepare for your fellowship year!

1. Relax.

No, really.

The most important, and most common response from fellows was to **not stress and do something fun**. You are in good company: STPF is a fellowship of great scientists, engineers, medical doctors, and veterinarians who have all made the cut for this transformative program. In some way or another, it seems like we're all overachievers burdened by imposter syndrome. Academia has conditioned us to believe we owe the world our unpaid labor -- but this isn't the expectation of the federal government. The best thing you can do ahead of your start date in September is to take some time to unplug and breathe.

If you have the means, take a vacation or a road trip. Spend time with friends and family you may be moving away from. Think about a hobby that you'd like to spend time on once you're settled in the fellowship. This investment in your happiness will pay serious dividends when you start "in" Washington D.C.

2. Start building your STPF fellow network.

Networking, even in the best of cases, can cause many to break out in a cold sweat. It's also key to your success, and in many cases it will bring you happiness during your time as a fellow. Many of the fellows you meet before and during your fellowship will become your social support network and will lead to friendships and relationships which last a lifetime. Historically, the mass travel to DC for Finalists' Interview Week afforded rapid connections with dozens of future colleagues.

Fortunately, it's possible to forge these friendships online too. Previous cohorts have created social groups on WhatsApp for various topics ranging from the Plant People, and STPF Outdoors, to Cooking, Fitness, and Mixology. Last year, the first fully virtual cohort created a Slack channel for all fellows to join. You can use tools like these to ask each other common questions, investigate neighborhoods to live in or discuss your favorite food joints to hit.

3. Take care of your existing responsibilities.

Everyone's situation will be different, with different existing demands on their time and details to work out. Fellows who are part of a couple often have to deal with the "two-body problem," navigating a second technical job search in a competitive market. Others are coming back to the US after time abroad, adding all the complications of an international move. One alum reported they bought a condo, dealt with the death of a parent, and found out they were expecting a child all in the three months before the fellowship began.

Basically, before you "prepare for the fellowship," you need to focus on whatever life is already throwing at you. Concentrate on completing the must-do tasks that will facilitate your move and your onboarding. Whether it's a job that remains full-throttle until your very last day, seeking out childcare or schools for your kids, processing security clearance paperwork, or researching the ideal commute, the "must-dos" shouldn't be underestimated. They can easily consume a lot of the extra bandwidth you now have.

The good news is that networking isn't just for work! As noted, there are wonderful communities of your colleagues already in place that can *and will* provide advice on everything from school districts to budgeting for the move itself. There are over 100 incoming fellows who are in a very similar situation to yours.

4. Reach out to your future mentor for a virtual coffee.

A handful of fellows emailed their future mentors and set up a virtual coffee to learn more about their portfolios. Before you start to fret about this piece of advice, remember: you are not yet an employee of your host agency, and as such, under no expectation to do any work on their behalf until after Orientation Week. Several fellows even noted that they received no response from their mentors, which makes sense given that you're not their responsibility yet! At the same time, other fellows reported that their mentors were thrilled to hear from them — it just depends on your future office's culture and the individual personalities involved.

Of those fellows who *were* able to block out time with their mentors, some were provided a strictly optional reading list to help with that head start we're all conditioned to think we need. Most of these readings went unread. In the end, everyone got off to a great start, regardless of whether or not they interacted with their mentors over the summer.

5. Do nothing!

In the end, there isn't a whole lot you can do to prepare for the job itself. This is particularly true for legislative branch fellows who won't even know their office or mentor until their first week. But regardless of your type of fellowship, this experience is "learning on the fly." In a few months' time, you'll be immersed in a novel work environment where every day gives you new challenges and opportunities!

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