



## Gaining Insight: An interview with the STPF Director

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Taking full advantage of the lessons that we have all learned during our time of remote work, I leveraged SOTF connections and found some virtual time on Dr. Rashada Alexander's calendar. During our zoom fireside chat, I got to know a little about the AAAS STPF Director (who is also an STPF alum!). I found it invigorating to speak with Dr. Alexander. Her passion for learning and continually bettering oneself will equip her and her team to bring STPF to new heights.

For STPF fellows current, past, *and* future, some of that discourse is below. As one of almost 4,000 alumni, I am honored to peek behind the curtain of this program. Please enjoy the wisdom below with a nice cup of coffee or tea and reflect on what being a fellow means to you!

***Many of STPF fellows (past, present, and future) both enjoy learning and look for examples in the career paths of others. Can you give us a glimpse into how you got to your current position as AAAS STPF Director?***

My Fellowship was at NIH from 2009-2011. I was there until 2019: I went from being an STPF fellow to being a Health Science Policy Analyst. Then, for about 2 years I was the Special Assistant to the Deputy Director (who is now the acting director of NIH).

I wanted to understand what to do when you have a pot of resources (people, money, grants, etc.). For instance, how do you think of partnerships and engagement? So, I shifted into a program officer position at NIH where I had a portfolio of grants I was managing and a portfolio of grantees I was interacting with. Where I had previously been was in the Office of the Director at NIH (a cool place to be), but what often happens in the OD is that you will get something ready, and then the Institutes, Centers, and Offices of NIH will take it on and run with it. I wanted to know what happens at the point in which it is ready to hand off and how to do it effectively. Then after that, I started to get restless. NIH is a wonderful place to be and it's a place where subject matter expertise is the most common currency.

At this point I didn't want to know how to do one thing, but instead many things in the service of a mission. Additionally, after spending 10 years in the Federal government, I thought wouldn't it be cool if someone like me with Federal insight could bring that to another sector? I could be a partner and connect people back to pieces of public service that could be really advantageous. For those reasons, I left public service in 2019 to work at a nonprofit, The Foundation of Food and Agriculture Research. It was a wonderful experience! I got to do really cool, difficult things, like its first- ever

impact report designed to think about internal and external processes.

I wasn't looking to go anywhere, then someone had mentioned my name for the STPF opportunity, and I thought "Somebody thinks I could do this?!" I looked at the job description and realized "I can do this!" Some things would be scary, but I am a true believer that if the next thing you look at taking on doesn't scare you a little bit, you probably shouldn't take it. The more I talked to people, the more excited about the position I became. I thought that this opportunity would grow me. And it has. It will continue to grow me.

***Sci on the Fly, as you know, is not only the STPF fellow-run blog and podcast that promotes public understanding of science and policy, but it is also an STPF affinity group. When you were a fellow, or as an alum, what types of affinity groups (AGs) interested you and why would you suggest others (both current fellows and alumni) get involved in them?***

There's a different crop of AGs from when I was a fellow. Interests move around and shift and we adjust the AGs alongside those shifts. AGs are often indicative of in-the-moment trends and interests, for example, right now we have a Data4Good group that started. Those AG members think about what all this data that exists actually means. It's like the difference between someone telling you at a party about Bitcoin and Blockchain and you understanding what it is. The AGs can help give people a clearer path into understanding different subject matter.

That being said, no matter the AG topic, I continue to think that they are a really cool opportunity, for two main reasons: (1) It connects you with people, not just within your cohort but before and after your cohort, as well as people outside of the fellowship who have common interests that is VERY powerful. (2) They can give you insights that you wouldn't get otherwise.

Maybe in your fellowship placement you are focusing in one area, but you're also interested in something different. There could be an AG for that. In my case, during my fellowship I kept an eye on the FIRE AG, which is not a group anymore, but it was focused on research and evaluation in Federal programs and how to use this data. For me, this information continues to be really important. I liked that that AG would bring in outside speakers to give insight and perspective in Federal and non-Federal spaces that folks may not have gotten otherwise.

In terms of what I would suggest, I rarely find it to be a bad thing to talk with other smart people about stuff I find interesting. You never know what you can learn and figure out, and where those connections can take you. Essentially, whether you're a current or alumni fellow, consider participating in AGs.

***The fellows in my year were the first fully virtual cohort many of us were virtual for our entire tenure. The class before us converted to virtual shortly after they started, and the class after us had at least part of their fellowship virtually. What are your thoughts on the benefits that the new hybrid environment provides fellows and the nation?***

There are going to be different opportunities now that most of us have become more comfortable with connecting with people in virtual ways.

If folks are working in a location other than your HQ (headquarters), you can still talk to them. That was not the case when I was a fellow. For fellows now, people will take your call however it comes through. That can also help with scheduling logistics, for example: an STPF at NIH wouldn't have to truck all the way between NIH and DoD campuses to speak with someone at DoD. Everyone can fit more in.

And pursuant to that point, we now must be *intentional* in a different way. We don't want to wear ourselves out by trying to do another meeting just because we can. It is just as important now to be intentional about your outreach efforts.

The fellows who have experienced what I call "pandemic-affected fellowships" have been able to think about activities that they couldn't do, and ones that they can do now. With hybrid and virtual, we can now think about the in-person mode as a tool in what we do, whether to initiate and build relationships, work through challenges, and "stick the landing." So, the new opportunity here is being able to understand and pursue the mode that makes the most sense.

STPF fellows will have differences among them in how their placement organizations return to the office. I think that we will start to find that if you are willing to make the effort to be in person when needed, there's an opportunity there. We may even get some progress going that may not have happened otherwise!

***It's been a little over a year since you've become the STPF Director, what are a few of the successes that you are most proud of?***

I am most proud of getting some of the alumni engagement efforts off the ground. STPF is about to have over 4,000 alumni: that's quite a bit of people across different sectors and across the country! Our alumni are a powerful group of people to engage with and to learn from. We want to make sure they continue connecting with each other and other parts of the science policy ecosystem. We've been able to establish some alumni-focused channels of communications and new events. I'm excited about some potential pilots such as alumni-focused fellowships, other career opportunities, and new professional development offerings.

Every day, I get to learn from the STPF staff, and that to me is another thing to be proud of! Being an alumna of this program and coming into this position, I've realized there is a lot happening. The staff does as well as they can they think with smarts, compassion, and with savvy about how to ensure that this program runs right and tight and that fellows have the best experience possible. I'm very proud that I get to be a part of that! I get to grow in this position and growth has always been one of my goals.

Also, because of my style and my clarity on issues that I am interested in, people have reached out to me in ways that they may not reach out to others. So now, there are opportunities that may not have happened otherwise. For instance, the Mass Media Fellowships program is being managed along with the STPF program. Managing these two unique immersive professional development programs together can give the professionals in these programs the opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other. What a windfall especially in these last few years when we have seen the value of clarity in media communication on science-related issues. On one hand, we have a program that builds a cadre of doers in the science policy ecosystem, on the other we have a program that builds a cadre of doers in media. The intersection of these two programs could be amazing!

***What are some of the things that you aim to champion during your tenure?***

The alumni engagement is a big piece. I've heard from quite a few alumni of the desire to have engagement with STPF formalized and strengthened.

Another one is how we articulate what comes out of this fellowship, how we frame it as a value proposition and why for 50 years people have continued to engage and partner with us. There is benefit in articulating the reasons. The benefit comes not just in terms of building our brand, but in being able to articulate what we bring to the world.

Related to that, I want to champion the excellence that I believe is STPF. Excellence is a feature, not a bug. There is nothing wrong with being good, there is nothing wrong with being as good as you can be. People come into this program because they want to work hard and accomplish goals. There is a benefit to that, to the cachet given to fellows when they begin their fellowships. We have fellows who are writing legislation, fellows on national bodies on climate — big things that are going to have impacts long beyond our lifetimes. In many ways, that excellence is our badge, our shield, and our weapon. It enables us to be effective in ways we may not have imagined.



***What are some words of wisdom you would like to offer our readers — past, present and prospective STPF fellows?***

Coming from academic environments and benchwork into this program, fellows quickly learn the importance of balancing the humility and confidence — you have to figure out how to walk that line.Â

The following are things that I like to say, and that others have said to me.

1. Reserve the right to improve! You will not know everything, you will screw up, yes, but that is required to get better. You have a bad day, tell yourself — I reserve the right to improve, the way I am today doesn't have to be the way I am tomorrow."
2. The next job you take does not have to be your forever job. Don't freak yourself out because the job isn't perfect, or it's not what you thought it would be. Some of the neatest things you will ever do may not start off looking that way.
3. Some of the most interesting things that you can try will look like they are marked

with chaos or controversy. Sometimes the “What is that? Is that on fire?” or “They have to do what in 10 weeks with what budget?” is the coolest stuff. Though with that, I encourage people to vet their opportunities. Not every fire is beneficial. Keep in mind that it is rare that you are going to find the perfect thing: I think of it as **progress over perfection**. Progress helps to move you towards the next thing which may be the “chef’s kiss” of your opportunities.

### ***Last, could you tell us a little about the header picture of you by the statue and the picture embedded within the blog post?***

In the header photo, I am pointing at a statue outside of the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, Austria. This statue spoke to me. Look at that guy, do you think when he woke up that he knew he was going to be crushed? Probably not. Sometimes your day does not go as you plan, or as you would like. And you roll with it.

The photo embedded in this post has a special place in my heart. In the photo is my cousin, my granddaddy, and me. My cousin and I were about three and two years old. My granddaddy was a farmer and worked in a factory in town. You can see in the picture some of the humungous watermelons that he grew. They were as big as us! My granddaddy had a 5th grade education and was one of the smartest people that I have ever met. Many of the things that I learned from being around him molded me as a reasonable person to interact with and work with. He used to say “We’re all human; we’re not robots” (that is what he used to say in place of “robot”). What he meant was no one is going to always get it right, so you do the best you can.

I also love this picture because it is good to be humble and to remember your roots. This little girl was thinking about how to get her hands on Laffy Taffy – she had no clue the path she would take and where she would be in 2022. Remembering that is powerful to me.

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### ***About Rashada Alexander***

Rashada Alexander provides strategic leadership for the AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowships program (STPF). With a team of 20 staff and a \$16+ million-dollar annual budget, she administers programming and professional development for more than 250 fellows annually in the executive, judicial and legislative branches of the U.S. government. As an STPF alum, she puts her experience to good use in leading the next evolution of the program to ensure it continues to excel in connecting scientific expertise with policymaking.

She joins AAAS from the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR), where she optimized and streamlined operations, and assessed the impact of FFAR’s research funding. Before that, she was a program director in the Division of Research Capacity Building at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Two of her 10 years at NIH were as an STPF fellow.

Alexander earned her Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Kentucky. She is also a proud alum of Youngstown State University where she earned a bachelor’s degree in chemistry.

She resides in the DC metro area with her husband, and enjoys action movies of questionable quality, doing silly dances even if people are watching, and gadgetry.

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