

A Scientist's Path to Policy

When Stephanie DeLuca started college, she had her heart set on becoming a geneticist. She wanted to learn how small differences in gene structure sometimes results in the development of disease.

As she learned more about chemistry, however, she decided to shift the lens through which she studied disease. "I preferred the way that chemists think about biological problems," she says. "They're looking at what is happening at the electron level, which I thought was a lot more interesting."

Then after college, she headed to graduate school, intent on becoming a research professor. But as she gained a better understanding of what academic research entailed, she discovered it didn't quite suit her.

"I didn't like that it would take so long to see the impact of my work," she explains. "I don't have the patience for that."

So, as she was finishing her Ph.D., she did some soul searching by reading, trying new things, and talking to people from different professions.

Of the areas she explored, politics piqued her interest the most. She had gotten involved with the National Federation of the Blind, a nonprofit that strives to improve the lives of blind people in the U.S.—DeLuca herself has



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albinism and is legally blind. Finding the advocacy work rewarding, DeLuca then successfully applied to the American Chemical Society's Science Policy Fellowship, which gives fellows the chance to work on policy in Washington D.C.

Now, DeLuca is a legislative assistant for

U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois. In her role, DeLuca focuses on health care and disability policy.

"I finally like my job," she says. "You get to engage with a lot of different people, and you can have real-world impacts on folks' lives."

The following interview was edited for brevity and clarity. DeLuca's answers do not represent the views of Sen. Duckworth or her office.

You mentioned your involvement with the National Federation of the Blind. What did you enjoy about that volunteer work?

I liked that I could voice my opinions, views, and needs with lawmakers, and express what these policies meant to me and my colleagues. I also liked being part of a network of people who cared about similar things.

Has your scientific background helped you in your current role?

A lot of the advantages come from not the science itself but from the transferable skills. It's as simple as trying to figure something out by iterative Googling—honing search terms—and developing a sense of which news sources are

evidence-based and reputable.

The science knowledge has been useful, too, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. I know enough about mRNA to explain things to folks in a way they can understand.

Do you have any career advice for students?

First, don't pigeonhole yourself. It's very tempting to think you have expertise in only one thing, but the rest of the world doesn't see it that way.

Second, try different things and see what you like doing.

Finally, figuring out what you want to do requires talking to a lot of people. Learn what their day-to-day is like, and why they chose the path they're on.

How has your visual impairment affected your experience as either a scientist or a legislative assistant?

It's been kind of a journey for me. I spent

most of my life trying to pretend I wasn't blind. I have usable vision and didn't even start using a white cane until graduate school, though I should have been using it earlier. Also, the academic system isn't really set up to be accessible, and you have to expend a lot of time and energy trying to navigate it.

Now, I'm very fortunate because I work for an office where having a disability is something that you don't have to be ashamed of. I can be my full self here in a way that I didn't feel like I could in grad school or in other jobs.

Do you have any advice for students with disabilities?

It's fair to acknowledge that it can be tough, and you probably will encounter some ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities). But the law is on your side, and you have the right to advocate for what you need. So, it's helpful to have a support network.