

The rewards of government work

The phone rang in my university office. “I’m pleased to tell you that we’re funding your grant,” the program officer at the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) told me. I was elated. I’d spent years trying to win support for my project on sea anemones—and now I could actually do the work. But hours later, I received another call—also from NSF, responding to an application I had filed 4 months earlier. “We’d like to offer you the job as program director,” said the caller. The choice before me was stark: I could continue on my academic path, or take a leap into a very different career.

Eighteen years earlier, I’d started my faculty position eager to launch my research exploring symbiotic relationships in marine organisms. But over time, I’d become more interested in mentoring students and serving as a catalyst to help others reach their goals. When I looked back on a 4-year NSF-funded research project studying coral bleaching in the Bahamas, I realized that the most rewarding aspect of it wasn’t the research; it was the impact the project had on the 18 undergraduates I took into the field with me. I’d seen them transformed by the opportunity to go beyond the classroom and get hands-on experience doing research, and I’d felt I made a difference in their lives.

I had also started to feel I could have a bigger impact working outside of academia. A few years earlier, I’d taken a 2-year hiatus from my faculty job to serve as a rotating program officer at NSF, working on ocean education programs. I wanted to see how NSF worked from the inside so that I could help launch research programs at my predominantly undergraduate institution. When I went back to my faculty position, I was full of ideas about how I could help my university take advantage of NSF’s programs. But my department chair told me to focus on my classes and normal faculty duties. I felt deflated. So the same month I applied for the grant, I also applied for a job overseeing NSF’s fellowship program for graduate students.

When both came through, I had a tough choice to make. Most of my colleagues advised me to stay in academia, where I had a satisfying job teaching and mentoring students. But my gut told me to take a chance and try something new—so I accepted the job offer.

It wasn’t an easy transition. My skill set and experiences were firmly rooted in academia, and at times I wondered



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whether I had what it takes to be an effective program director. But eventually, I realized that my academic experiences were assets to capitalize on, not obstacles to surmount. Teaching large classes had honed my communication skills, which proved essential when speaking with NSF’s leadership team and the broader research community. Working with diverse students on class projects gave me the confidence to lead strong teams centered on common goals. I could also empathize with the academics I worked with and help them navigate the ins and outs of NSF.

Best of all, my job at NSF filled the void I felt in my academic work. As a professor, I had an impact on scores of students each year. Now, I felt I was making a difference for the thousands of

students who applied to the program each year—for instance, by revising the application materials to be more inclusive and by training reviewers to take a broader view of applicants’ qualifications. I celebrated the fellows’ successes as if I were their adviser.

After 10 years at the agency, I retired this past May. If I’d stayed in academia, I would have maintained some status as a professor emeritus. But now, when I search for my name on NSF’s staff directory, it’s gone—as if I no longer exist. So, I remind myself why I chose the government: to enable others, especially students, to make new scientific discoveries and to chart their own—hopefully fulfilling—career paths. ■

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