Career Profile of Policy Analyst, Christie Drew, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?
Chief, Program Analysis Branch, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. I have been at NIEHS for nearly four years, all in positions relating to the evaluation of the impacts of the grants that we fund to organizations across the US and globe. I’ve been Chief for a little over 18 months.

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?
I have a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Washington. My dissertation work involved using GIS to map and communicate cleanup progress at the Hanford Nuclear Weapons facility to a variety of stakeholders so they could participate in decision making at the site.

Did you do a postdoc? Where?
No postdoc.

What are your main daily responsibilities?
The branch is responsible for evaluating the impacts of our funded grants. We code all the grants that are submitted, examine our wide range of portfolios, conduct long term evaluation studies in key areas, develop information tools to enhance evaluation, and communicate our results to a wide variety of stakeholders. We recently developed a manual that is intended to help outreach/translation focused grantees create metrics to measure progress and success.

What are the keys to success in your career field?
Flexibility/adaptability; hard work; positive attitude; willingness to put up with bureaucratic challenges; comfort with both qualitative and quantitative inquiry; ability to focus others on what they want to know before they start talking about how they are going to collect the data to find out.

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?
It mostly feels like serendipity... but I have also had some key mentors/advisors along the way. I have always aspired to work in the federal government – and have been working in the environmental health field since college. I knew I wasn’t a bench scientist so I had to look hard for a non laboratory pathway. I was fortunate to be working with people who encouraged me to go on to get the Ph.D. and I had a pivotal advisor who helped me think through the various program options. I’ve also been in situations that were a terrible fit, and I walked away. It was risky but it worked out for the best. I think about it like this: all my advisors and employers and colleagues showed me a variety of doors leading to career paths that I could take. I picked the doors that were most interesting to me and those led to other even more interesting doors. I never would have predicted my job title, but it is a perfect match.
What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?

First the practical: If you are interested in the government, create a bunch of resumes and search engines on USAjobs.gov – it is a tremendously powerful site. There are new requirements to get folks hired to the federal government in record time, so you have to be very fast with your applications. Follow up with a call to the personnel officer to make sure they have all your materials. Ask them to confirm that they have received everything you submitted. Oh, and never compose in a webform… always create in a program like Word and then copy and paste your answers.

If you are specifically interested in Evaluation, there are a lot of certificate programs and graduate level accreditation programs that are coming up. But I just look for people who have an analytical mind, know how to piece together a data collection, analysis and reporting strategy based on the evaluation questions (i.e. conduct research) of interest. Finally, some more global advice... Don’t be afraid to create your own career. Your perfect job might not even exist today... mine barely did 10 years ago. Ally yourself with people you “get” and who “get” you. Ask them for advice. Take it when it speaks to you in your gut. Get yourself out there, go to conferences, meet people who you might like to work with. Ask people for “informational interviews” – apply for things in strange sounding offices and different places if you can. Its so difficult to know on paper what to expect, so go to every interview that you can... and remember you are interviewing them as well. ALWAYS bring questions.

Links for more information on this career path:

Science Policy: Establishing Guidelines, Setting Priorities
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2003_02_07/noDOI.207798542189967389

At the Junction of Science and Policy
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2003_02_14/noDOI.4452169750447402201