TIBBS Career Blitz Career Profile Questionnaire

Career Profile: Sharlini Sankaran

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?
Executive Director, Research, Engagement, and Capabilities Hub of North Carolina (REACH NC), a little over 2 years in current job. Previously: Assistant Director of the North Carolina Office of Science and Technology (NC Department of Commerce).

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?
UNC Chapel Hill, Biomedical Engineering

Did you do a postdoc?
No

What are your main daily responsibilities?
I do a little bit of everything as this project is very far-reaching, consisting of many different stakeholders and funders, yet our staff is small.

- Project management – overseeing implementation, expansion, improvement of a complex tech project spanning 19 different institutions.
- Relationship building and advocacy – meetings, and conversations with different stakeholders – university faculty, administrators & leadership, economic development organizations, nonprofits, government officials, general public - to gather input and ensure buy-in & support for project
- Talks, presentations, trainings, etc to many different audiences in-state and nationally.
- Supervising tech and troubleshooting aspects of project.
- Short and long-term strategic planning – convening and leading workgroups, proposal/ white paper/ strategic plan writing, fundraising, etc.
- Lots of writing – white papers, press releases, peer-reviewed papers, budgets, projections, etc. (I have never had a business/ management class so much of this is learning by example).
- A small percentage of my time is spent on basic research for an NSF Big Data grant that I am co-PI on.

What are the keys to success in your career field?

- Being a “T-shaped” person: http://www.ceri.msu.edu/t-shaped-professionals/
- Very strong networking and communication skills – ability to build and maintain relationships, understand the economic landscape and relationships amongst different entities, give public presentations, write good papers, are key to my job.
- Willingness to ‘think outside the box’, being flexible when it comes to career options, and take chances on non-traditional opportunities for funding, career opportunities, volunteer opportunities etc.
- Persistence, demonstrated ability to work hard and effectively, work in multi-disciplinary teams, and deliver results.
What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?

- Job satisfaction – realizing that my interests and strengths lie in areas such as science policy, science administration, etc rather than tenure-track basic research.
- Family obligations – limited ability to relocate geographically
- Financial obligations – needed to work full-time to support family and finish dissertation.

What activities (if any) did you participate in that helped you be successful in obtaining your job?

- Did consulting and/or volunteer work for several economic development, public policy, and grantmaking organizations.
- Took advantage of leadership training and other training opportunities available to me, took on additional supervisory and project management duties in previous jobs.
- Worked with many different North Carolina science-and-tech and economic development stakeholders in previous jobs – was able to point to a concrete list of accomplishments when interviewing for current job.

What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?

- You will have to invest a lot of time and energy into building your credentials as a non-tenure track/ non-academic professional. You may have to spend some time doing volunteer/ pro-bono work and educating yourself about the field that you want to transition into, whether it is economic development, public policy, or nonprofit advocacy.
- There is no magic bullet and the job search is going to take a while. Understand that there are not hundreds of science policy jobs waiting to be filled and that these jobs are equally competitive as tenure-track jobs.
- Volunteer work and giving back to others will always pay off, directly or indirectly. Choose your volunteer opportunities wisely and make sure they reflect your passions and/or give you an opportunity to grow as a professional.