

## Career Development Seminar Overview: Think Tanks/Policy Institutes

Karlie Sharma, IRTA postdoctoral fellow, NIAID, FelCom Career Development Subcommittee  
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The career development seminar presented this month focused on careers in think tanks and at policy institutes. The panel featured specialists involved in science and technology policy. They work on proposals of new policy to both the U.S. Government and the global community for the advancement of scientific and technological topics important to both the scientific community and to the public.

The panel's speaker was Jennifer McArdle, who holds a Masters of Philosophy in Politics from Cambridge University and a Bachelor of Arts in political science and justice studies from the University of New Hampshire. She is a Fellow in the Center for Revolutionary Scientific Thought at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies. She is responsible for providing strategic planning guidance for the Department of Defense, in the division of Defense Microelectronics Activity and conducting research on cyber security, big data and emergent information communication technologies.

Jennifer began with a short description of what science and technology (S&T) policy is: (1) S&T for policy, where science and technology evolve and influence policy and (2) policy for S&T, in which new policy is proposed to aid the development of science and tech. The job of a think tank Fellow is to help translate technical S&T concepts for the public and the policymaker. Think tanks are crucial for this, as major technology advancement has a large impact on society and new policies, and laws can help manage the impact and mitigate the risks of new S&T. Jennifer further elaborated on her day-to-day activities and what developing an effective policy can require. First, it is important to be able to anticipate and understand the effects of new technology. This is followed by testing and validating the utility of different policy options. Finally, policies must be translated into something that can be read and understood by technologists, government and the public.

As a Fellow at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Jennifer was able to give some insight into what the Potomac Institute is. The Potomac Institute is an independent, not-for-profit, public policy research institute. Their mission is to identify and drive debate on key S&T issues, provide an academic forum for the study of related policy issues, develop meaningful S&T policy options and ensure S&T policy implementation at the intersection of business and government. Core priority areas include national security, science and technology forecasting, terrorism and asymmetry, national health policies and emerging threats and opportunities. The Potomac Institute works in collaboration with several government agencies, including DARPA, NASA, the DoD and several others.

Having explained what think tanks do, Jennifer then elaborated on what skills are needed to become a Fellow at a think tank and what to look for when applying to think tanks. Crucial skills needed by anyone who is considering working for a think tank include analytical

skills, communication skills, writing skills, networking, fundraising abilities, program management skills and event coordination and organization. If you do decide to become involved in policy institutes, it is also important to look through the research portfolio of the institute before applying to gain a better understanding of the types of projects the institute is involved in. Many institutes are politically affiliated, so this is another aspect that should be considered when investigating employment at think tanks.

Though she was unable to attend the panel, Dr. Sweta Chakraborty also contributed several important points and advice for working at a policy institute. Dr. Chakraborty is the Associate Director at the Institute on Science for Global Policy (ISGP). She received her doctorate in Risk Management from King's College London. Dr. Chakraborty developed an expertise in risk and behavioral science. She emphasizes that to ensure a long and upwardly mobile career in science policy, obtaining subject matter expertise through graduate studies and/or professional experience is crucial. It is also critical to network and seek out interdisciplinary meetings, conferences, and events on current policy topics (e.g., genetic engineering) that attract individuals from various sectors (e.g., government, academia, industry).

Dr. Chakraborty also described a typical day, highlighting her duties and responsibilities at ISGP. A typical day at the ISGP consists of training and mentoring new and existing staff. She oversees daily staff activities, which include researching, preparing, writing and editing background materials and reports for the variety of topics that the institute covers. She is also responsible for identifying, building and maintaining relationships with key collaborators (e.g., funding bodies, academic institutions). Finally, she is responsible for allocating the organization, management, and implementation of ISGP's programs, which currently include the Signature Series (e.g., emerging and persistent infectious diseases), the ISGP Academic Partnerships (IAP) program, and a program on Global Challenges (e.g., climate change). These programs consist of specific series to which staff is assigned to help plan, organize, and convene ongoing debates.

For those who wish to pursue a career with ISGP, Dr. Chakraborty emphasized the experiences that ISGP is looking for. Academic and professional experience concerning the evaluation of scientific research and conclusions as well as strong oral and written communication skills are very important. ISGP also requires candidates to demonstrate good problem-solving skills, a keen attention to detail - especially with respect to recording the substance of oral debates, editing notes from a variety of sources, and interviewing subject matter experts to obtain clarification of ideas. Strong candidates for the ISGP will possess the ability to conform to rapidly shifting priorities and demands. Candidates must be able to respond well to direction, adjustments, and alterations promptly and efficiently. ISGP looks for candidates who have the ability to work independently in a fast-paced environment as well as a strong ability to meet target deadlines and manage their time effectively. Successful candidates will be able to work both independently and in a team-oriented, collaborative environment.

Ultimately, the success of a global policy institute such as the ISGP is dependent upon the skills of the core team. The ISGP and the Potomac Institute have set a high bar for the types of candidates they seek, but it is also necessary for potential candidates to understand the nature of the work conducted at a neutral not-for-profit think tank to ensure that it is within their scope of interest. It is highly recommended that those who are interested in working for a think tank follow the guidelines set out by our invited panelists. For more information about think tanks, please visit <http://think-tanks.insidegov.com/>.