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2023 SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Spotlight: Virginia C. Salo, Ph.D.

Virginia C. Salo is an SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

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In a few sentences, what is your role at the agency you work for?

As a Fellow, my role was largely centered around supporting the Language Development and Multilingualism portfolio within the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This experience prepared me for my current role as Program Officer for the same portfolio, which I started mid-March. The role of a program officer can best be described

as wearing four different hats, that of scientist, administrator, communicator, and steward. As a scientist, a program officer defines program objectives, develops funding opportunities intended to support the field and move the science forward, and advises on the suitability of applications for funding. As an administrator, a program officer coordinates with review and grant management officers throughout the application/grant lifecycle to ensure regulations and policies are followed. As a communicator, the program officer is the primary point of contact for investigators and other outside scientists; and as a steward, a program officer ensures that NIH funding is properly and prudently utilized.

What interested you in becoming an SRCD Policy Fellow?

When I applied for the fellowship, I was in my third year of a postdoc position. While I loved the research I was doing, my mentor, and the lab group with which I was working, I was losing sight of how the basic research I was doing fit into the broader scheme of truly impacting the lives of children and families for good. I wanted to learn about the policies which directly and indirectly impact families, but I also wanted to learn about how all of the pieces and players fit together. My hope, at the time, was that I could either bring that broader understanding back to my own research or that I would find a new space from which to work. As I have transitioned to working full time at the National Institutes of Health, I've found a happy medium – navigating daily between the basic science and the federal policy realms.

What has been the most memorable project you have completed during your time at the agency?

There has long been a recognized need for building strong communication between all stakeholders in the scientific enterprise to ensure the work we are supporting, the evidence drawn therefrom, and the programs and policies based on that evidence truly reflect the needs and the strengths of the communities we intend to serve. In September 2022, I lead a one-day, trans-NIH workshop on socioeconomic disparities in language development aimed at addressing the fact that much of the research on the early language environment and how to support language development does not represent the communities often targeted for intervention. The workshop brought together brilliant scientists, practitioners, and policymakers – individuals bringing a wide variety of perspectives – to have what thankfully turned out to be a very open, honest, and respectful discourse about what is needed to move the field forward. I am heartened to see this conversation continuing in many venues since that workshop!

What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone who is interested in SRCD's fellowship program?

One of the greatest surprises of the fellowship is how varied each cohort of fellows is. Each fellow brings their own unique research background, lived experience, policy knowledge, and goals for what they want to get out of the fellowship. This diversity is part of what makes the fellowship so wonderful, as we are all able to learn not only with but also from each other. My advice for anyone interested in the fellowship program is to think about what makes you unique as your number one asset in applying. I urge you not to be scared off if you think that your background doesn't match with that of previous fellows. Further, I would urge future fellows to then carry that idea into their fellowship position. It can be hard to think about what you are bringing to a position where you are primarily expecting to learn, but it is my experience that the placement offices welcome and benefit from the new ideas that fellows bring to the work.

What has been your favorite aspect of SRCD's fellowship? Please explain why.

I am surprised, as anyone else to say that my favorite part of the fellowship experience has, bar none, been the networking it has afforded. That was the part of the fellowship that scared me the most and so I just leaned into it. The conversations I had during the many informational interviews I conducted were invaluable in helping me to discover and refine my own goals and priorities, to get a sense of the varied roles one can play in the broad space of science policy, and to truly appreciate all of the variables that go in to deciding what the next best step in someone's career might be. It was inspiring to talk with so many bright and passionate individuals, each working within their own sphere toward a shared and integrated goal of using science to better the lives of children and families. Many of the training and professional development opportunities afforded by the fellowship are geared toward developing a sense of the varied but interconnected parts of the science-policy realm, but it was the one-on-one conversations that, for me, helped give color and substance to that picture.

What is your favorite book?

My favorite book of all time is The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. While technically a children's book, it offers so much wisdom about how to approach life and our relationships with others. I love it so much that I had an excerpt read at my wedding, from a section of the book when the Little Prince meets a fox who begs to be tamed by the Little Prince. This part of the story speaks to how the way we see the world is forever changed by our relationships with those we love. Many of the best lines in the book are more poetic in the original French, but I think just as impactful in English. I also recently learned that I share a birthday with the author, which was declared International Little Prince day!