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2024 SRCD Congressional Policy Fellowship Spotlight: Hannah Valdiviejas, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

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SRCD Policy Fellow 2023-24 cohort

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

I work in the office of U.S. Senator Coons on the Health and Education portfolio. In my role, I am responsible for all legislative activities related to education and child development/well-being. While no day is the same as the last, my primary work involves advancing legislation that establishes a grant program funding the infrastructure of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and other Minority Serving Institutions. I also lead a collaborative project with USAID that monitors the implementation of legislation aimed to improve international coordination around (1) early childhood development; (2) maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition care; (3) basic education; (4) water, sanitation, and hygiene; and (5) child protection plans.

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

I will never forget the time I staffed the Senator for an event celebrating a non-profit in Delaware, an organization that provides high-dosage tutoring for students in grades K-3 in the lowest 25% for reading proficiency. Without warning during his speech, the Senator called my name, mentioned my background as a preschool teacher (which I did not think he knew), and thanked me for being there at the event with him. I felt so important!

How do you think the fellowship has helped further your career?

The fellowship has and will continue to help further my career in unimaginable ways. Coming straight from a Ph.D. program to the Hill has boosted my confidence in how to navigate distinct professional spaces that require different skills, and has made me even more passionate about my advocacy for children coming from disinvested backgrounds. This fellowship has given me the opportunity to "zoom out" from the specifics of research to understand the larger scope and context of the issues that we care about as researchers in child development, like gaps in knowledge or data that are hindering creating optimal conditions for children and their families. This fellowship has also helped me further my career by understanding the most effective ways to discuss issues based on who the audience is, which I find to be invaluable.

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

Just do it! Someone once said to me "if someone offers you a seat on a rocket ship, don't ask what seat. Just get on!" You can figure out the rest later! This is such a unique and prestigious experience. If you are like me and did not know exactly what you wanted to do after graduate school, this fellowship is for you. You will be exposed to so many opportunities and the environment in D.C. is so ambitious, your goals might become clearer here.

was also nervous about moving to a new place and being far away from my family and friends, but the great part about this fellowship is that you come in with a network of built-in friends (i.e., your cohort and alumni). That makes it a lot easier!

What is something you learned in the last month outside of your field?

Appropriations! Before this fellowship, I had absolutely no idea what appropriations meant and therefore, I did not know how important appropriators were. During my time at U.S. Senator Coons' office, I had the opportunity to understand what "appropriations season" looks like in the office of an appropriator - the

congressional members who are responsible for funding…everything. During appropriation season, I also evaluated applications focused on education or child development for Congressionally Directed Spending. Learning how federal budgets and spending work has given me important knowledge and skills for advocating on behalf of children.

What is your favorite book?

My favorite book is Ismael by Daniel Quinn. It is a philosophical novel about hidden cultural biases, based on a conversation between a gorilla and a human.