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# June 2010 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Elisa Klein, Ph.D.

2009-2010 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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It's often said that Washington becomes a ghost town in the summer. Traffic is noticeably lighter, grocery stores less crowded, and Congressional priorities on the budget evolve into continuing resolutions until after the November elections. It's not surprising that this contributes to a belief held by some that government does little. My experience this year as an SRCD Policy Fellow could not be more different than the stereotype suggests.

As I enter the final months of the fellowship, it is a good time to reflect on and appreciate the commitment and hard work that characterizes those I've worked with in the Executive Branch, regardless of the time of year or election cycle. I feel truly honored to have a minor role in the process of identifying and supporting good science that may ultimately inform public policy. It has been an outstanding opportunity to listen and learn, to collaborate with superb colleagues, and to make a contribution in ways and across domains different than I could have imagined a year ago.

My fellowship placement in the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has enabled me to develop a new appreciation for the complex, interdisciplinary nature of the behavioral and social sciences. The office was established in 1995 to stimulate research at NIH in order to more fully understand the role of behavioral and social factors in health. OBSSR engages in a wide array of activities: planning, leading, and supporting trans-NIH research initiatives, leveraging investments in behavioral and social science research across the institutes and centers, providing education and training, and serving as a source of information for NIH leadership and Congress.

Through these activities, OBSSR supports basic and translational research that furthers understanding about the interrelationships between behavioral and social factors and health. This year marked the beginning of two new trans-NIH initiatives, the NIH Basic Behavioral and Social Science Opportunity Network (OppNet), and the Science of Behavior Change (SOBC, one of seven initiatives designated for special support by NIH Director Francis Collins through the NIH Common Fund). I have been fortunate to play a small role in the rigorous planning and implementation process related to the launch of OppNet, serving on working groups tasked with developing a communications plan and mapping out concept areas to be considered for research.

When I first arrived at OBSSR, I was uncertain how my training as a developmental psychologist with a focus on early development and education would fit into the overall mission and strategic plan of this office, particularly as someone without a background in public health. I was encouraged to meet with the scientific staff to identify relevant projects, and also to think about how I might be able to pursue independent work. It soon became clear to me that many of the broad issues of translation, adherence, dissemination and implementation that form a large part of the OBSSR portfolio have corollaries to some of the most perplexing and persistent problems in education, and that early education is just one of many contexts in which behavioral components of health might be addressed. Bringing a developmental science perspective to bear when discussing these issues contributed another component to the interdisciplinary approach the office uses to address problems, especially in new areas of inquiry.

In addition to the projects described above, I have been able to contribute to a number of OBSSR's ongoing initiatives as well as to identify and pursue a new area of interest. Space limitations permit highlighting just a few of these activities:

1. Communicate behavioral and social science research (BSSR): I have assisted with a number of projects designed to help disseminate behavioral and social science research to other scientists as well as the

public, such as identifying relevant published BSSR across the 27 institutes and centers of NIH to highlight through a new link on the OBSSR website.

2. Assist in the planning of a scientific meeting at the National Academies on Social Environments, Stress, and Physiological Indicators of Health: As a fully contributing member of the planning team, I was able to provide input on the selection of developmental scientists and other expert researchers for the panel, as well as the delineation of focus questions that specifically incorporated issues related to contextual influences and developmental trajectories into the meeting agenda. I am now on a working group examining approaches to address the outcomes of the meeting.
3. Collaborate with NICHD on program announcements, workshops, and grantee meetings. Collaborative relationships with developmental psychologists at NICHD have provided opportunities to engage in grant related activities traditionally not part of OBSSR's portfolio, to expand my fellowship experience beyond the immediate office. I have participated in grantee meetings on work, family, and health research, and children's exposure to violence; provided support for a workshop on executive functioning in early childhood; and contributed to discussions about research priorities for the effects of repeated military deployment on children and families.
4. Conceptualize, organize and implement an OBSSR sponsored workshop on The Social and Behavioral Sciences (BSS) in STEM Education. The goals of this workshop are to discuss opportunities for more active BSS involvement in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education initiatives; gather information on the current status of the BSS as scientific disciplines included in STEM education reform; outline and discuss potential strategies for increasing the visibility of BSS in STEM education; and to generate research priorities. An outstanding interdisciplinary panel of behavioral and social scientists, education reformers, policy makers and social science advocates will gather in mid-July to debate the issues related to social and behavioral science integration into STEM education reform.

Serving as an SRCD policy fellow has been a goal of mine for many years. Competing work priorities and family needs pushed this back until that time euphemistically known as "midcareer". Disentangling from dissertation dramas and other academic crises has been challenging and not always successful, but I would not have missed a minute of this exceptional year. I am grateful to SRCD for the opportunity to realize this goal, and to deepen my understanding and commitment to work at the intersection of developmental science and social policy.