

TIBBS Career Blitz - January 2012

Career Profile of Science Policy Expert: Sheila Newton, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?

Director, Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, NIH
I have been in this position since May 1996.

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?

University of Massachusetts/Amherst, Biochemistry

Did you do a postdoc?

Yes

What are your main daily responsibilities?

Supervise staff of 4. Oversee office responsibilities including: collecting and analyzing information on NIEHS research projects; providing reports upon request to the NIEHS Director, NIH Director, HHS, and Congress; drafting the NIEHS portion of the yearly President's Budget Request; developing the NIEHS Strategic Plan.

What are the keys to success in your career field?

Communication and analysis skills. Writing ability is the most important, followed closely by oral communication skills. In my job, I have to be able to read and comprehend cutting edge biomedical literature and also translate and explain it to non-scientists. It also helps to be interested in policy.

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?

Serendipity, and recognizing and following what I was good at. But that took me a while. I spent 10 years combined as a research assistant, postdoc and research assistant professor before I fell into the opportunity to move into science management and policy.

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

Get interested in the ultimate real-world application of what you do. Find out about the policy issues. Read the editorials and track the efforts of your affiliated professional societies. Think about the issues, write down your ideas, even submit letters to the editor. If you are lucky enough to have a mentor who gets involved in policy-related issues, such as serving on a panel at the National Science Foundation, offer to help with the background work on that task.