

What a Way to Return to D.C.: my experience attending the SPS Congressional Visit Day

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Déjà vu was all I could think as I drove through downtown D.C. on my way to the hotel. The Washington Monument on my right, the Jefferson Memorial on my left, and groups of people in business professional outfits on their way home from work. Good memories began to flood into my head. Last summer I had gotten the opportunity to work as a Society of Physics Students (SPS) Summer Intern right here in D.C. I was one of the Mather Science Policy Interns placed in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. I had spent two months living and working in D.C. and I had come to enjoy the area. Now I was back, over half a year later, for a Congressional Visit Day. The only difference being the temperature. It was a much more bearable 40-50 F (278-288 K) versus the 90 F and humid during the summer ... I am from Alaska after all.



Figure 1: Left - standing in front of a snowy Capitol during the CVD. Right – standing in front of the Capitol during the summer with my internship donor, Dr. John Mather.

Congressional Visit Days (CVD) are fairly common among professional societies. Their purpose is to bring experts to Capitol Hill to better inform and lobby lawmakers. The SPS CVD is unique because instead of bringing full-fledged physicists they bring undergraduate students. It's a great opportunity for students interested in science policy, like myself, to learn what interacting with Congress is like. It also connects lawmakers to students studying in their district and introduces them to the Society of Physics Students.

As Kerry Kidwell-Slak, the SPS Assistant Director, who graciously offered to pick me up from the Baltimore airport, dropped me off at the hotel, I started to realize how excited I was for the next few days. Little did I know just how packed and crazy they would be.

Tuesday morning, I woke up early. Much earlier than I would have liked considering I had stayed up late and was still severely jet lagged, but there was a lot to do. Technically, we didn't have to do anything until noon. However, I had gotten word that the committee I had worked with over the summer was holding a hearing. A budget justification for the DOE with Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy. As a last-minute decision, I decided to stop by the office, say hi, and sit in on the hearing. Guillermo and Phoebe, two of the other CVD students, were interested in joining, so I tied my tie, buttoned my suit and we headed to Capitol Hill. The morning went great. I touched base with a few staff members I had worked with, we heard some fiery exchanges between senators and Sec. Perry, and Elizabeth Warren even walked by us in the hall.



Figure 2: Sitting in on the DOE Hearing on Capitol Hill during the CVD

The rest of the day wasn't nearly as eventful, although it was still enjoyable. We had a variety of talks and discussions about the best ways to engage and interact with Congress. We also went over our schedules for the next day. As someone who was born and raised in Fairbanks, Alaska and now attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I was looking forward to meeting with the Alaska offices: Sen. Murkowski, Sen. Sullivan, and Rep. Young. And as president of our SPS chapter I was excited to share how we had been engaging the Alaska community with physics.

Wednesday morning was even earlier than Tuesday. The first thing I did was pull aside the window shades and glance outside. Predictions were calling for a "giant" snowstorm. There was definitely a layer of snow on the ground, but I wasn't all that impressed. Apparently, the federal government saw it a little differently because we got a notification that they were officially closed for the day. Luckily, some congressional offices were still open, including all of the Alaskan ones. It's a point of pride for Alaskans to go into work no matter what the winter conditions are like.

My first meeting of the day was a constituent coffee with Sen. Sullivan. Walking to the Dirksen Senate Office Building from Union Station I got hit with another bout of déjà vu. It was early in the morning, the Capitol Building was looming in front of us, and taxis were honking. Despite the familiarity I was nervous. I'd never done anything like this before, I didn't know what to expect. As it turns out I had nothing to worry about. The meeting went very well. I mingled with some of the other staff, most of whom were also from Alaska, until I had the opportunity to speak with the Senator himself. I talked about SPS and about the work I was doing for the Fairbanks, Alaska Borough regarding energy efficiency. He seemed genuinely interested and even introduced me to one of his staff and mentioned that we should stay in touch. In all, it was a good start to the day.

Things really started to get interesting after the meeting with Sen. Murkowski's office. The meeting itself went smoothly. As Lisa Murkowski is the chair of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, the guy I was working for over the summer sat in on the meeting. This made things more relaxed and again everyone seemed interested in what I had to say. Though, by the end of the meeting I was a little disappointed. It had sounded like the senator was going to attend, but she had never showed up. We were just about to leave when Sen. Murkowski's scheduler burst into the room. Talking quickly, she apologized that the senator couldn't make it, that a press conference had gone 30 minutes over schedule, but if we still wanted to meet the senator she could take us into the Capitol Building. Of course, I said yes.

Since it can be difficult to keep a busy Senator in one place, we rushed down to the basement of the building and into the hallways that lead to the Capitol Building. The first security checkpoint was closed, so we had to walk to a different one where it seemed like everyone was being directed through. All the staff were visibly frazzled with the "big" snowstorm and everything being shut down, but we managed to make it past security. We then boarded one of the cute little trams that runs from the office buildings to the Capitol. While I had ridden these quite often over the summer, it was a big deal for James and Elise, who were with me. Usually they are just for staff members, but it was not a usual day. We got off the tram at the Capitol Building and walked through some old, intricately decorated halls to a small elevator, which we took down and ended up just outside the Senate floor. This was another unexpected treat. The tourist entrance to the Capitol was closed, so the only way in that day was by a staff invitation. We waited around for a few minutes and then Sen. Murkowski showed up. I had gotten the chance to meet her this summer and she recognized me, which pretty much made my day. We had a brief conversation about what I'd been doing in Alaska and then she had to leave for another meeting.

After all of that, our last meeting, with a staffer from Representative Young's office, seemed low key. It went well and I finished the day on a high note. Overall, the experience of this congressional visit day changed how I view the interaction between Congress and the public. It also helped prepare me for any future congressional visits. I hope to someday return to D.C. and use the skills I gained from these crazy, intensive, few days.



Figure 3: I had productive talks with Sen. Dan Sullivan and Sen. Lisa Murkowski from Alaska