

Consider a Career in Public Policy

Pamela A. Monroe*

Family scientists are beginning to recognize that many career options are available to them. Ours is a relatively new discipline, and our past efforts were focused on developing a sense of identity as a profession. We could hardly prepare students for alternative careers until there were enough scholars and professors to handle the academic training of family scientists. Now, we are approaching the saturation point for academic positions. In a 1987 survey of all student members of the National Council on Family Relations, nearly 40% of respondents indicated that they expected to practice family science in an academic setting. It is my opinion that our academic job market simply cannot absorb so many new professors. It is time for faculty members and students to consider, prepare for, and even create new opportunities for family scientists. This essay will describe one such career, that of the legislative research analyst.

I am employed as a research analyst with the Louisiana House of Representatives, and work primarily with the Health and Welfare Committee. Analysts have a variety of educational backgrounds and experiences, but most hold master's degrees in disciplines such as public administration or political science. (Attorneys are hired for these positions also, in which case the title is attorney rather than analyst.) My academic background in family science and my advanced degree (Ph.D.) was considered unique but quite appropriate for the Health and Welfare Committee, and I was welcomed as a professional who might have a different perspective on many of the issues the committee would address. Analysts may or may not come to the job with special areas of expertise, but they are encouraged to develop areas of expertise primarily through attending conferences or seminars, making contact with recognized experts, and conducting research. For example, I had certain knowledge and research experience in health care issues and, from my family science coursework, substantive knowledge relevant to family issues. Since coming to work for the legislature, I have drafted legislation on many topics, including adolescent pregnancy, privatization of health care services, AIDS, licensing for counselors and other professions, and medical indigency, to name a few.

The primary work of an analyst is to conduct research and draft legislation for legislators, committees, and single-interest citizens or citizen groups with legislative sponsorship. In this position, research takes the form of extensive information gathering and critical comparisons rather than data collection and statistical analyses. Very few legislators are familiar with complex statistical techniques. My statistical and research methodology skills are very useful, however,

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as they enable me to read critically and evaluate the research findings I may want to incorporate into a bill or memorandum. I am able also to use findings from oursocial and family science research journals. The major bill drafting period lasts for about two to three months, during which time I will prepare around fifty to sixty pieces of legislation. By the end of the legislative session, I will have prepared a total of approximately 80 pieces of legislation.

During the legislative session, analysts are responsible for attending the meetings of their committee, drafting amendments to bills, preparing corrected versions of bills, working in the House chamber preparing amendments to any bill on the calendar--often as it is being debated on the floor--and handling various technical duties. Staffing a committee includes duties such as scheduling meetings and consulting with the chairman to set the agendas, reviewing legislation and preparing necessary background material, and assisting with parliamentary questions. In the interim between legislative sessions, analysts may be asked to provide staff assistance for legislative task forces or study groups, or to conduct extensive research for a legislator. There are a few committee meetings during the interim, usually to deal with matters such as agency rules and oversight, or other technical issues. During the interim, analysts might spend extra time reading, conducting research, or attending conferences on a certain topic to gain substantive knowledge or in anticipation of the importance of an issue in the next legislative session.

When preparing for a career as a family scientist in a public policy setting, one important goal is to be well-trained as a family scientist. This will be your unique contribution to a career setting crowded with political scientists, economists, and public administrators. Broad content areas and a good variety of coursework covering many family issues is recommended. My academic minor area of concentration was in public policy, and this preparation was very important in introducing me to a discipline that is quite different from family science. If you are considering a career in public policy, it is advisable to focus on policy courses rather than political science or public administration courses, if possible. After a strong introductory course in public policy, my own classes included policy implementation, policy and program evaluation, and a health policy seminar.

There is no substitute for practical experience when preparing for a career outside of the usual area of family science. At the end of my doctoral program, I participated in an innovative internship program offered in the College of Home Economics at the University of Georgia serving as a legislative aide for a session of the Georgia Senate. This internship was vitally important both for the learning experience and for the credibility it later gave my application for employment with the Louisiana legislature. A variety of legislative, congressional, or agency internships may be available and are very desirable. There are many research fellowships for which family science students or young professionals may compete, and even partisan campaign or volunteer work may give some valuable insights or experience. Your state librarian would be an excellent resource to help you find more information on such opportunities. The practical experience will be very important in getting the illusive first job. After the academic training, an internship experience, and the first year or two at a job, the individual will have a better idea of the types of employment that are available and what he or she would like to aim for in long-term career goals.

The field of public policy is an appropriate career choice for family scientists for a number of reasons, but I will mention only two. The demand for knowledge and information is great among government decision makers, but at times it seems that their information about families is especially unscientific. Family scientists should try to have research-based knowledge about family issues form the basis for the government response to the problems and needs of families.

The other reason I will mention for choosing public policy as a career is that if we are going to effect change in public policies, we must be present and working constantly with the decision makers. We cannot enter the unique policy arena only occasionally, by writing a legislator or testifying before a committee, and expect to have a long-lasting impact. We must be with the policy makers every day, to provide information, answer questions, and rebutt arguments; this level of commitment is a career choice. These comments are not meant to discourage family scientists from participating in policy development in whatever way they are able, but to encourage more family scientists to participate on a full-time basis.

Perhaps the best argument for informed participation in the policy process is a simple one: The process grinds on, whether or not family scientists participate. Important decisions are and will be made that affect families. Do family scientists prefer that the process continues without the knowledge of families they might contribute? If the answer to this question is "no," then family scientists should begin to consider full-time careers in the public sector. I welcome readers' comments and thoughts.

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