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Academia boot camp

University scientists put through three-day session on how to negotiate the hurly-burly of Legislature, insistent reporters

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Debbie Drake Dunne of the Woods Institute for the Environment conducts a mock interview with UC Davis researcher Steven Cliff in a Capitol hallway last week, with a banana standing in for a microphone. University scholars from throughout the state were taking part in three days of special training on how to engage with politicians. Sacramento Bee/Jay Mather

Anthony Eggert, associate research director of the UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies, wasn't more than a minute into his debut testimony as an expert legislative witness when a gruff voice from the dais interrupted.

"What's cellulostic fuel?"

Next, Eggert was admonished for including on his list of global warming remedies a "carbon fee" at the gasoline pump -- a political nonstarter in California.

Then, asked how the Legislature might otherwise wean Californians off fossil fuels, Eggert said, "There's no silver bullet, only silver BBs." He had no specific solutions. In short, he bombed.

Luckily for Eggert, this was a dry run.

He and 13 other scholars from the University of California, Davis, UC Berkeley and Stanford University were at the state Capitol last week to undergo special training on how to engage with politicians and navigate the rough-and-tumble politics of the state Legislature.

Legislative staffers, policy analysts, regulators and former legislators fluent in the politics of energy and the environment drew the Ph.D.s outside of their comfort zones of jargon and journals and into the hurly-burly realm of politicking. In role-playing exercises, the trainers subjected the academics to the sometimes rude and dismissive treatment that greets expert witnesses in legislative hearings.

Posing as harried, aggressive news reporters, the trainers shoved microphones -- carrots or bananas, actually -- under the noses of the eggheads for the classic "ambush interview."

And, because many important decisions at the Capitol are made in the space of an elevator ride, the experts practiced "elevator pitches" to get their points across in 30 seconds.

The academics, who traded casual campus wear for power ties and polished shoes, are the first graduates of the three-day boot camp that ended last week with the hearing room and hallway "ambush" drills.

Organized by the Woods Institute for the Environment at Stanford, the Inter-University Scholar Program is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, said Barton H. "Buzz" Thompson, director of the institute.

The need for better networking with politicians became apparent at a climate change policy workshop that the institute convened at the Capitol last May that brought leading researchers from the three universities together with key decision-makers from government, industry and environmental groups.

The senior researchers already are skilled ambassadors of climate science and well known for their contributions in developing and implementing Assembly Bill 32: California's landmark law to fight global warming by clamping down on vehicle and power plant emissions of heat-trapping gases.

They include Stephen Schneider, a climate scientist at Stanford; Michael Hanemann, an economist at Berkeley; and Dan Sperling, director of UCD's transportation institute.

The three helped instigate the boot camp to develop a new generation of scholars who will "bridge the historic divide between the academic community and the public decision makers," Thompson said.

Contributions from scientists, economists and engineers are especially sought after as California takes on the daunting job of implementing AB 32.

Enacted in September and trumpeted by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in his re-election campaign, the law requires California to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to the level emitted in 1990, when the state's population and its economy were smaller.

But the law is silent on how the state will achieve the benchmark by the 2020 deadline.

"There's just a lot of questions we don't have answers for," said Alberto Ayala, who heads the new climate change research unit at the state Air Resources Board.

The young university researchers and scholars in the inaugural boot camp were chosen because of their interdisciplinary approach to environmental problem solving: they are expert in agricultural economics, transportation engineering, atmospheric sciences, public policy, statistics, even firefighting science.

Several of the researchers said they were stunned by the speed and chaos in which important policies and laws are made.

"It's hectic," said C.Y. Cynthia Lin, 28, an agricultural and resources economist at Davis.

"Whereas for academics ... we don't really have deadlines," Lin said. "We take as much time as we need to fully answer the questions. But that is something we need to change to communicate with policymakers."

Engaging with politicians, however, has a downside for university researchers, whose pay and promotions are tied mostly to peer-reviewed scientific publications.

"Any time that is diverted from research receives zero appreciation from your peers," Hanemann said. "It's considered odd behavior" to network with lawmakers and regulators.

"As long as you don't mention it, you're OK."

Nicole Lepoutre-Baldocchi said she encouraged her husband, Berkeley scientist Dennis Baldocchi, to apply for the boot camp because his work on climate change is too important to be confined to journals.

"Scientists all say they don't have the time to talk to politicians or journalists, but that's no excuse," Lepoutre-Baldocchi said. "The stakes are too high."

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