**American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS): Catalyzing Advocacy in Science and Engineering Conference**

This past week, I was in Washington, D.C. attending a science policy conference intended for undergrad and graduate students from scientific backgrounds interested in policy. The first three days of the conference were intended to give us a better knowledge of the policy making process; we learned about how agencies such as the National Science Foundation work with Congress and Executive Branch agencies such as the Office of Science, Technology, and Policy. We also learned about the budget process. Speakers included Judy Schneider, a Library of Congress staffer who educates all freshmen members of Congress, and Representative Bill Foster, the only Congressperson with a PhD in Physics, and one of four Congress people with PhDs in science. To put that into perspective, there are around six times more Congress people with only a High School Diploma / GED than Congress people with PhDs in science. I don’t mean to make a value judgment, but I do view this statistic as a reason why scientific facts may be ignored in policy-making. The last day was spent on Capitol Hill. UC Berkeley’s Government Relations staffer in charge of our visit – Michelle Moskowitz, who is amazing – helped set up breakfast with Dianne Feinstein, and in-person lobby visits with Representatives Barbara Lee, Ro Khanna, Mimi Walters, Eric Swalwell, Jerry McNerney, among with other Congressional offices and members of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.

Tech policy obviously played a big role in our discussions and conversations. We talked about both the role of tech and education in making sure that people aren’t left behind and feel as out-of-touch as they did in the 2016 Presidential Elections. Professor Bill Bonvillian, a professor at Georgetown University and a lecturer at MIT, talked about how a distrust of science contributed to tech seeming like a partisan issue, even if opinions were based off of fact. He also talked about how universities are not necessarily viewed as social mobilizers, but rather as exclusive to elites. He said that one of the most important things for our generation to consider is how to incorporate people who were left behind by technological booms, such as people who used to hold repetitive manufacturing jobs. Because there is a fear that science will disrupt the economy, there is also a general learned fear of science and scientific funding that Senators and Representatives take advantage of to further their own agenda. Moreover, Professor Bonvillian talked about the role of higher education in lessening the wage gap. He said that the economy grows on a technological curve, but education to ride that curve was cut off and stagnated as a result. Those who rode the curve – us and, in many cases, our parents – are beneficiaries of this curve. It is part of our social duty as (possibly) successful people in the workforce to help others climb this curve, whether it’s through increasing access to education (decreasing the cost, especially of online universities and community colleges) or offering more job trainings for different paths (vocational school, apprenticeships, etc.).

While the purpose of the CASE conference was to learn about science policy in general, we did spend most of the last day advocating for sustained scientific funding. One of the things I noticed in meetings with Congress people is that overwhelmingly, each office tried to redirect us to another. Most Democratic offices told us that they supported more scientific funding, and what we should be doing is reaching out to Republican offices. Republican offices either told us that they also supported science and that we should be reaching out to members of the Appropriations Committee, or that they couldn’t make the cuts anywhere else. I learned a lot at this conference, and was able to have many different conversations with people who were on both sides of the issue of whether scientists should be apolitical.