

## Illini Science Policy Scholars

### Executive Summary 2020-2021

In the spring of 2020, University of Illinois Extension launched the Illini Science Policy (ISP) Scholar Program. This program is a unique post-graduate, early career opportunity for UIUC graduates who are interested in University of Illinois Extension's critical issue areas – food, economy, environment, community, and health – and the policy decisions affecting those issues.

Modeled after successful, long-running programs like the Presidential Management Fellows and Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship, the program matches highly motivated and qualified UIUC graduates who have completed their masters or doctoral degree from UIUC with local, state, or federal agencies and legislative offices in Illinois.

The Illini Science Policy Program has two main program goals:

- To facilitate the training and development of the next generation of public service leaders in Illinois; and
- To unite public agencies, Illinois Extension, and top graduates to address substantive and emerging issues of public concern relating to food, health, environment, economy, and community.

During its first year, five Illini Science Policy Scholars were awarded a 12-month paid appointment to explore public service careers. Scholars received support through mentoring, training, and networking events and established professional connections through their host agencies and engagement with key stakeholders.

Host agencies included:

- Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology - Education Group (DoIT)
- Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity - Office of Broadband (DCEO)
- Illinois Department of Agriculture - Meat and Poultry Division (IDOA)
- Illinois Legislative Black Caucus and Black Caucus Foundation (ILBC/F)
- Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus and Latino Caucus Foundation (ILLC/F).



Funding for the ISP Program is provided by Illinois Extension, host agencies, U of I System Office of Governmental Relations, and PepsiCo.

Under the guidance of their host and Extension mentors, the Scholars addressed public policy solutions to improve equity and access, economic vitality and food production, environmental justice, and health for Illinois residents, especially those living in under-resourced and underserved communities.

"In the beginning, I wasn't sure what to expect. I was first introduced to communities and then set to work with them on my own. I was being looked to for guidance as the leader and that gave me confidence. I realized that I was the one who knew things and they respected that. It was the game changer."

- DIAMOND RUFFIN, 2021 Scholar with DCEO Office of Broadband

## Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from a programmatic perspective, based on host and extension mentor feedback, include:

1. Participation in the ISP partnership is most successful when the value-add for each organization is intentional and visible;
2. Collaboration among all partners is key for successful implementation and sustainability of each agency project beyond the terms of the appointment; and
3. “Mentoring” as a practice in early-career placements can have different meanings, so clarity in understanding expectations and outcomes is

“I always have been interested in protecting the environment, and as I go through my career, I realize this issue cannot be tackled without having community engagement on the plate. I think this is a wonderful opportunity to contribute to Latino communities using research skills I have learned in graduate school while also learning more about policy and project development.”

- ANA PAULA SANCHEZ, 2021 Scholar with Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus/ Foundation

## Recommendations

Recommendations for programmatic enhancements based on Scholars’, host and extension mentors’ interviews and yearlong feedback include:

1. Amplify aspects of the program to show the ways in which public engagement informs policy;
2. Facilitate a connection, where and when possible, between the project(s) the Scholar is doing for the host agency and Extension;
3. Model this as a Fellowship, internship, or post doc program and/or increase the duration to 2-years for continuity and sustainability of Scholar projects;
4. Establish clear expectations, roles and responsibilities for hosts and extension mentors; and
5. Recognize value added for both host agencies and extension and find means to make that visible to various stakeholders.

Lesson learned by the scholars as a result of their participation, include:

1. Effective change starts with understanding the needs of the community at a systemic level;
2. You need to engage in the community for your changes to be trusted and significant; and,
3. Public service is a process that takes time, but seeing small, incremental wins are a sign of progress.



2022 Illini Science Policy Scholars, from left: Susan Ogwal, Skye Lewis, Shubhika Agarwal, Yasamin Koshpour, and Adrienne Pickett. Not

“If we don’t try anything new, we don’t achieve beyond what we are doing. This has all the pieces in place to be successful and to continue to move us forward.”

- LISA DIAZ, 4-H Assistant Dean & Director, Extension Mentor for 2020 ISP Scholar

## Looking Ahead

Six new scholars were selected in the spring of 2021 to begin their appointment in summer. Extension continues its partnership with DCEO, ILBC/F, ILLC/F and added two new host agencies: the Office of the Lieutenant Governor and the Illinois Board of Higher Education. Although they had wanted to continue participation, the Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology and the Illinois Department of Agriculture did not find a suitable candidate but did express interest as a potential host in the future.

