

## CHAPTER 7 - FORMER PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

### Words Of Wisdom From Your Ancestors

The following are nuggets of wisdom from past program participants, pieces of advice that don't exactly fit anywhere else in this manual. They are opinions that have been learned through experience and that, when passed along, will hopefully make your experience even more beneficial.

There's Something For Every Participant: I have to say the program is wonderful! The people and experience are top notch. Everyone in the program has a similar, but unique, experience and the best part of someone's tour may be the worst of another's. So, take everything with a grain of salt. I wish everyone in the Agency could go through this developmental program.

While You Are Still In The Planning Stages: Read the materials, listen to the information at the seminars, and talk with former participants at your Center or those who have rotated to a Center.

If You Will Have To Travel Cross-Country: Make your trip to/from the Center an adventure, as we visited Memphis, Tennessee, The Grand Canyon, and the Mojave Desert on our way to California and we plan to go through Yellowstone on the return trip.

Do In Rome As The Romans Do: If you are coming from out of the DC-VA-MD area, ensure you have enough cash (credit card, or travelers' checks) on-hand when you arrive at NASA HQ to pay your first month's rent and deposits. The place where I stayed required either cash or money order.

Time Flies: We found that the early part of the program year is often characterized by an investment on the part of the participant. Give it time. It takes awhile to come to grips with the new acronyms and work environment. The later part of the year is where the great and unique benefits are gained. Many participants agree that by the end of their year they would love to have the first few months back.

Don't Sell Yourself Short: This is one of the best opportunities in any job to do what you want to do. Don't limit yourself to just work, that's only 8 or 9 hours of your day. The new area you are in has a lot of stuff to do. I think that may be personified in D.C., but wherever you are, remember, it's temporary. So don't hesitate, and say yes to every opportunity you possibly can.

Go Where YOU Want To Go: You don't have to have an impressive resume to get a new assignment (i.e., experience). Most offices will welcome you with open arms and teach you the ropes. No group has enough people to get all the work done, so you are the help they are looking for. If your host assignment doesn't meet the expectations you have for your year, don't let anyone inhibit you from seeking a better one.

How To Figure Out Where To Go: The more your rotations are based upon need for work and your enthusiasm for that particular set of tasks, the more rewarding the experience. Not every assignment, nor rotation, is successful. However, if your interviews with employees in your target organization are focused on specific tasks, deadlines, expected products and impacts, you will have enough information to decide if this rotation/assignment is appropriate. You must be proactive in your search for assignments. Select a Host Supervisor who will agree to take an active part in your training and development.

Do Some Homework: The only advice I have is to find out as much as you can about your developmental work assignment before you begin in order to make sure there are no surprises. But even if there are, remember, "THIS IS YOUR YEAR," and you have a lot of flexibility to move to another assignment.

Formal Program Training: The program will have various training sessions, meetings and workshops throughout the year. Make every effort to participate in all of them. They were planned with a particular purpose in mind. Take any pre-work for workshops seriously; it has been designed to get you to think about what really matters in your career. The training planned into the program concentrated on leadership, orientation, teamwork, congressional operations, negotiation, creativity, benchmarking, and the re-entry process. Don't be afraid to venture out on training of your own. This program opens doors to training opportunities that may not be readily available at your normal work location. Look at OPM courses, Universities, commercial, Brookings Institute, Smithsonian Associates Program, etc.

It Can't Be Stressed Enough – HAVE FUN! Plan class outings, parties, and get-togethers, especially when you are 'out of town' on workshops. Our group had a Christmas party with a karaoke machine and we had a blast. Remember you are forming acquaintances and friendships that will last a lifetime. Also, remember to share the responsibility of planning the events, you are all top-notch leaders; don't be afraid to use your abilities.

Don't Limit Yourself To "NASA Only" Assignments: Look for assignments outside of NASA as well. There are opportunities at other government agencies, Academia and Commercial companies. Even international

industry assignments are within the realm of possibilities, as a member of the 2001-2002 class proved with an assignment to Italy, although it required more paperwork than anticipated. Focus on where your career is and where you want to go when choosing a primary assignment or a collateral assignment.

Look For These Things In An Assignment: A desirable primary and collateral assignment should have the following requirements:

- Well-defined job with responsibility
- Exposure to top management decision making
- Involvement in the budget process
- An opportunity to meet people in the Code (HQ) and develop an understanding of what everyone does in that particular Code
- Periodic feedback sessions with the Supervisor to review assignment (s) progress and issues
- Logistical support (desk, computer, electronic mail, etc.)
- The hosting organization has to be aware that you will also be involved in other program activities.

Work Outside of NASA: In particular, look for opportunities to work on national issues, administration priorities and the congressional process. This provides wonderful opportunities to see how NASA fits in national policy, see how other organizations handle issues, change, challenges, and various cultures; and gain exposure to and learn from as many different leaders and role models as possible. In addition, there's a lot to learn from a corporation or Agency that is downsizing, starting-up, merging, or restructuring. Be a part of that decision process and learn new ideas. I believe it is beneficial for NASA if we work with our customers to better understand their processes and issues (i.e., private industry, other federal agencies and universities).

Keep In Touch With Your Planned Host Supervisor: for your initial assignment, even before you get here. If your assignment is outside of NASA it is especially important to make sure you have met requirements of your host assignment (e.g., security clearances, agreement between NASA and host, work assignment details) as soon as possible to maximize the experience and hit the ground running.

Don't Feel Intimidated By The Folks That You Will Come In Contact With: I did my assignment in Code S where everyone had the title "Dr." before their name except me. At those first staff meetings, several folks thought I was another secretary. In the early part of your assignment, you may have to explain to folks several times just what you're there for, and then offer to be of assistance to them. No one turned me away because I didn't have a Ph.D.

On-The-Job Training Is Important: It appears that getting fully integrated into an existing organization presents a difficulty common to many program participants. This is an artifact of moving into an existing organization that may have a well-established organizational personality. It appears that time provides the best solution to this situation. I suggest that participants look for opportunities to maximize this on-the-job training, and pursue them. Sometimes, you have to take the initiative and make it happen.

Establish A Detailed Work Plan: It is my advice that as you are making your final decision with your host organization supervisor, you should request that a detailed work plan be prepared. This plan should be available to you during the summer orientation, so that you can utilize it to design your individual development plan. Once you make your final move, you can continue your conversations with your supervisor to fine-tune the plan.

Get Maximum Exposure: Get an assignment that gives you maximum exposure to as many Codes or offices as possible.

Keep In Touch With Your Home Center Supervisor: It is important to periodically contact your Home Center Supervisor to keep he/she up-to-date regarding your developmental experience. In addition, share a copy of your Mid-Term Report with your permanent supervisor to communicate the progress that you have made and your plans for the remainder of the assignment, as well as the Final Report. Not only does your permanent supervisor have a genuine interest in your developmental experience; remember that he or she approved your participation in this exceptional program.

Look For Responsibility: My only word of advice is to work with your Host supervisor to obtain responsibility for one or more activities within the organization. Your responsibilities should be clearly defined and the associated activities should have milestones and deliverables associated with them. It doesn't matter how big or small the activities are as long as you are responsible for getting them accomplished.

Stay Receptive To Changes In Assignment: I made one mistake that I would caution future participants against: making a commitment to stay in one Code for the entire year. I felt awkward breaking my one-year commitment to the office I started in when another opportunity arose; they were gracious about it although the situation caused me personal grief. So, the moral of this story is: you don't know what opportunities may present themselves, either through chance or from your own networking. Don't limit yourself to one office, and be flexible. (The program now

requires a 90-day collateral assignment, so you can't stay in one place for the whole year.)

Be Flexible: People try to make sure everything is arranged before they get here in terms of how the entire year is to be structured. I think you should have your first assignment arranged but you will find once you get here that there are opportunities to work in almost any area. Plus, you might find that the job you thought you were to do is not really all that fun. Since this is your year, you want to get the most out of it, so be flexible. As the year progresses, you will learn about other areas that you might become more interested in.

The Secret To Success: You basically get what you plan for and adjust to. The training personnel and budget resources will support your decision if selected but the employee who is creative, assertive, and innovative will have the highest probability for success. This will not guarantee success, but the probability will greatly increase-especially if you choose to "find or create" your job/rotation.

You Can Make Some Good Friends: From a previous assignment at Headquarters, I can say that the friends you make during an assignment like this are very important. I am still close friends with many of them, even after ten years. Their help enabled me to make a major career change and I still benefit from their help and guidance. I am sure the same will be true of the current program class.

You Can Depend On The Coordinators For Support: I probably encountered more bumps in the road in the beginning with my developmental work assignment than any of my other classmates. Rather than reliving the gory details, I'll simply say the program leaders, along with members of my office really went the distance to smooth out those bumps and level the potholes I encountered in the beginning. I mention this to make you aware of the fact that if you have any problems at any point during your assignment, the programs leaders are always there for you to discuss any issue with them.

What Kind Of Collateral, And When? My collateral provided me with an opportunity to gain insight into other areas of NASA not related to my specific field. I was also provided an opportunity to gain deeper insight into areas at my Home Center. I performed my collateral assignment during the middle of my year. Looking back, I personally recommend this rather than electing to perform it at the end of my year because it provided me more opportunity to concentrate on my re-entry to my Home Center.

Consider A Unique Collateral: Explore the opportunities to do a collateral assignment in one of the Codes that is unique to NASA Headquarters.

These include External Relations, Policy and Plans, and the Office of the Administrator.

Take Chances: When I started the year, I was excited, optimistic and ready for change. I quickly found out that the change I expected was “lightweight”. The Orientation and subsequent workshops will demand a soul-searching you have never imagined. Some days you'll feel lost, confused, and overwhelmed. But if you keep an open mind, the fulfillment is extraordinary. I conceived my collateral at our Orientation to work at Kennedy Space Center and possibly gain industry experience as well. With just two months to go before I began my assignment, I lined up work on the International Space Station hardware integration and testing as well as potential industry experience with an onsite contractor. If I hadn't spoke up and acted on my hunch, I would not be writing these words to you. Everything that I've done during this year has been a chance and not once have I regretted the outcome. Stay tuned...

Workshops: Draining, but beneficial. If you're serious about making a difference in your life and if you are serious about the program, “soak up” all the information you can at each workshop; the results are quite stimulating.

Balance Your Time Wisely: The program has several elements in it that could turn out to be very demanding unless you make a conscious effort to balance. Those elements that are challenging, but rewarding are: Being a part of Workshops, AA Briefings, Shared Experience and actively participating to improve and benefit from the program. Developing skills and experiences through various training opportunities. Making a contribution to the organization of your primary and collateral assignments. Establishing you own leadership choices in values and vision, and then taking the action required to accomplish results towards your personal mission through the leadership model.

For Those Of You Going To Goddard: The ability to perform the collateral assignment at HQ is a convenient option from GSFC.

Ask! Ask! Ask! I found during my assignment at Headquarters that if there something I wanted to do, a meeting I wanted to attend, a person I wanted to meet, all I had to do was ask. I'm not sure what it is like at the Centers, but Headquarters is used to having Developmental Program participants around and many of the people there will bend over backwards to help you out.

## **Experiences**

The following are brief descriptions of the experiences that previous participants had in various Headquarters Codes or at Field Centers. This information is provided to give you a sense of the wide range of opportunities available for your primary and collateral assignments. Some information may be dated due to changes in organization, programs, and functions.

### **Family Experience**

#### **Commuter Marriage**

A few of us conducted “commuter” marriages during this year. For any of you contemplating this option, it can work, but requires a lot of hard work. I talked to people who are at NASA HQ, both in the program and on other assignments, and experiencing commuter marriage at the moment. When asked about her commuter marriage experience, one person simply said, “Don’t”. Otherwise, here are some guidelines collected from many people.

Make sure your spouse or partner understands that you are not leaving him or her permanently (if that’s not your intention), you are just choosing to participate in this one-year training program.

Call early, call often. One of us calls every day at the end of the day to review what went on for both parties during the day. Many people call multiple times per day. One of us often leaves the phone open during a TV show that both he and his family are watching, thus sharing it with his family. Cell phones offer blocks of time where long distance calls can be made for no extra cost from anywhere in the US covered by cellular service. Get one of those plans – it’s worth it.

Get home at least once per month. Any less frequently suggests that you are deserting the person at home with responsibilities of maintaining home and family.

Pace yourself on going home. I tried to fly home every weekend during the first few months, which proved to be exhausting and allowed me about one night to relax before I started gearing up to travel back the next day. Now, I have extended time between visits but try to make the visits longer (long holiday weekends, business trips). One person who drives home 2 – 3 hours one way each weekend finds that embarking on the drive is even hard at times.

Share the travel. Bring your spouse, partner, and family to your assignment location for a visit. Incorporate them in your hunt for a place to

live. What might have seemed alien to them now will be a known commodity. Exploring new locations is fun!

Roll with the punches. I never anticipated the events of September 11, 2001, and they threw a monkey wrench into carefully crafted travel plans by canceling or changing reserved flights, and closing Reagan National Airport.

If something significant happens at either location, contact each other. The spoken interaction, and simply knowing that your loved ones are safe, is invaluable (even for an “I”).

Be ready to drop everything and return home on a moment’s notice if something serious comes up. That’s not negotiable, even for the program.

### **Taking The Family With You**

Many program participants brought their spouses and sometimes families with them when they relocated for the year. A common difficulty that was experienced by the parent who stayed home with young children following relocation was due to the lack of friends nearby and no access to a babysitter, she found himself mostly trapped in the temporary apartment or house.

Other tips from parents:

- Call the local chamber of commerce early (as soon as you know in which community you want to reside or when you know you are in the program) to get contacts for team sports such as soccer and football as the sign-up for these activities occur in spring for the fall season.
- Contact several churches for pre-school programs (not just daycare) and ask for recommendations of other churches in the area that may have programs/openings. One participant found a preschool at a local church upon asking the secretary at his new church where her child went.
- The program does not pay for relocation or housing of family members, so if you decide to take your family with you, it will come out of your wallet. Fortunately, the per diem is sufficiently generous that you can still come out ahead if you don’t go overboard.
- The most difficult thing for my spouse was leaving her friends and family. Since she was very involved in volunteer activities at our church, she had to leave her “job” in order to accompany me to LaRC.
- My children were suitably young (3 and 5) so that, despite leaving grandparents and friends, the transition was relatively smooth. One thing that we missed was the stable of competent baby sitters that we had cultivated in Huntsville.



- For us, the best thing we did was choosing a church to attend regularly. Through our adopted church family we were able to make new friends and get involved in local and community activities.
- We have taken the opportunity to get out and see everything we can while we are here. The ages of our children make doing some things difficult (such as going to see the Virginia Symphony).
- The program requires a fair number of long trips away from home. Because we had all moved to Virginia, my wife did not have her usual support network to back her up when I went out of town. For her, it became a growth experience in learning how to run the household with me gone.
- My final message is be sensitive to the stress and demands being placed on the spouse and children. For the program participant, the excitement of new experiences and training help offset the inconvenience of being away from home for a year. Provide similar experiences and strong emotional support for the spouse and children so that they may find this year as fulfilling as you and well worth the aggravation.

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