

Science@CornellVet

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Science, not Silence

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On Earth Day, April 22nd 2017, scientists from around the world swapped lab coats for rain coats to march in the rainy streets of Washington, D.C. They were accompanied by science enthusiasts from various walks of life, all united by one message—science matters! Students, post-doctoral associates, faculty and staff from the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine made their way down to the United States Capitol to lend their voice to the cause. As Dr. Christa Heyward, a postdoctoral associate in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology said, “there is strength in numbers.” With an estimated attendance of over a million people worldwide, 100,000 of which marched in D.C. alone the collective voice that spoke out in support of science was loud.

Many that participated in the march were motivated by a growing chasm that has emerged between science and the public at large. “It is important to connect scientists with the community and humanize scientists in a way that shows, ‘hey we are working for you!’” says Dr. Tisha Bohr, a post-doctoral associate in the Department of Molecular Medicine who participated in the march in D.C. Her sentiments are echoed by Sabrina Solouki, a second-year graduate student in Immunology and Infectious Disease at the College. “The scientific enterprise forms the fulcrum of our economy, our health system, and our society,” says Solouki. “We as scientists need to reinforce the message that federal investment in research does not just benefit the scientific community alone, but also benefits every resident of this country.” Dr. Gerlinde Van de Walle, Harry M. Zweig Assistant Professor in Equine Health, believes that the key is effective communication of science. She says, “despite science being our passion, we as scientists have a hard time speaking up and communicating our science. We should do that more, and attending the march is a first step in that direction.”



While the march was historic in its own right, it is important to use it to catalyze change. “The march has awakened scientists and has planted a seed to think about next steps to take. With funding getting tougher, we as scientists need to become more proactive” says Van de Walle. According to Dr. Avery August, professor and chair of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, science “has been politicized, and the only way to not let this process continue is for science to be non-partisan,” he says “We need to inform elected officials on the importance of science through letter writing campaigns, OpEd pieces and voting.” Dr. Gunther Hollopeter, Assistant Professor in the Department of Molecular Medicine, who marched with his lab in D.C., says we should go one step further: “We need scientists to become politicians and lobbyists. That will give scientists a voice in government and increase our influence on policy decisions.”

The Advancing Science and Policy (ASAP) group at Cornell has already initiated projects to promote interaction between students and politicians. “Take a Politician to Work Day” Brings local politicians, like the Mayor of Ithaca, to tour Cornell research labs and listen to graduate students speak about the importance of their research. ASAP also organizes a Hill day where ASAP members meet and interact with their home

representatives or state senate offices. “These discussions usually touch upon the importance of federal funding, seminal science legislation or policy, as well as general dialogue regarding the research we do at Cornell,” says Solouki, who is also president of ASAP. Keeping in contact with those who make policy is critical, because according to Bohr, “there is a continuum of misinformation that is perpetually contributing to public policy. There needs to be a shift away from this type of policy making to making policy based on facts, that serve to address actual real-world problems.”

Bohr also emphasizes another way scientists should become involved. She says, “science educators can work on making their teaching techniques more inclusive to reach a broader range of people, many of whom are left behind in the current way that science is taught. Also, outreach to local schools to get younger folks interested and engaged in science is a good way to bring science to the general public.” Her sentiments are echoed by veterinary student Kyra Marsigliano who marched with her dogs in Ithaca. As people working in the science, she believes that it is our duty to make an earnest effort to improve public understanding. “My next step will be moving to Jacksonville FL, one of the most conservative cities in the country. I plan on doing educational outreach (focusing on science/veterinary medicine) in the local schools says Marsigliano. Dr. Cynthia Leifer, associate professor of Microbiology and Immunology, agrees. She marched so that the future generations of scientists are trained to be creative, innovative and use rigorous scientific methods. We need to defend science, she says, because “if we don’t, we risk allowing our fact-based messages to be drowned out by the falsehoods, with no scientific basis, that are spread so widely on traditional and social media outlets.”

The march is just a first step in the process of advocating for science. As the official website for the march for science rightly states, “We marched. Now, we act.”

–Divya Shiroor, PhD student in Comparative Biomedical Sciences

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