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Cornell graduate students march on Washington

By Kathleen Corcoran

In 1988, Mario Roque was a young boy fleeing El Salvador with his family to escape civil war. Today, Roque is a student at Cornell Law School preparing to work in public service helping other immigrants. On April 20, Roque joined 11 Cornell graduate students and Weill Cornell Medicine students on Capitol Hill for a day of robust conversations on student loans, STEM education, immigration policy and the future of medicine.

Kristen Adams, Cornell associate director of federal relations and organizer of the event, said, "It was a wonderful day and opportunity for Cornell graduate and professional students to talk about federal financial aid and science policy."

Steve Halaby, a third-year doctoral student in the field of molecular biology and genetics, is passionate about educating the next generation and recruiting more minority students into science. "We need to invest in STEM now," he said.

"There aren't enough of us [minority students] in science. Part of the problem for Hispanics is culture," he said, noting that when he was young, neither he nor his parents knew what a Ph.D. was. He believes disadvantaged children should have the opportunity to dream big, and he said that starts with the parents: "One of my efforts is to teach minority parents how their children can get a Ph.D."

He said just like basketball heroes and pop culture heroes, there should be science heroes for children. "We need to be heroes for [the next generation]," Halaby said.

Weill Cornell Medicine students advocated for, among other things, the importance of Perkins Loans for graduate students, without which many students would face overwhelming debt. They wanted members of Congress to know that by 2025, it is estimated the doctor shortage in the U.S. will reach 45,000 to 90,000. According to the students, this is not due to a lack of interest in medicine, but because the cost of a medical education is prohibitive without assistance such as public service loan forgiveness, which forgives loans to those who serve disadvantaged populations.



Provided

Students from the Graduate School and Weill Cornell Medicine on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

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David Byun, who hopes to one day to serve cancer patients in economically disadvantaged communities, would benefit from public service loan forgiveness. Of being on Capitol Hill he said: “My heart is in it. It feels good to speak up. Our best hope is that we’re advocating, not only for ourselves, but for our colleagues, as well.”

Weill Cornell Medicine student Cindy Parra said: “Just like every single vote counts, every voice counts. Being here reminds us that we need to speak up. We feel like we can influence change. We feel like we’re being heard.”

“I am grateful to all the students who took the time to advocate for issues important to the graduate and professional sphere,” said Adams. “There is no better evidence of Cornell’s commitment to public service than these eloquent and enthusiastic student advocates.”

Congressional staff listened intently, took copious notes, asked questions and advice, and asked the students to stay in touch. More than one Congressional staff member mentioned how there aren’t enough scientists in Congress and that they value the insights scientists bring to the table.

“We spend a lot of time advocating for Cornell students in the abstract on Capitol Hill,” said Dianne Miller, director of Cornell’s federal relations office. “None of our data or statistics will ever be more compelling than the students themselves. It’s important for policymakers to hear firsthand from them how federal student aid and science policies will impact their futures.”

Students visiting D.C. included Michelle Lee from Cornell Law School; Rebecca Donnelly and Suzanne Nelson from the College of Veterinary Medicine; Linda Majani from the Cornell Institute for Public Affairs; Gary Kocharian, David Byun, Milna Ruffin and Raul Martinez-McFaline from Weill Cornell Medicine; and Charlotte Levy, a doctoral student in the field of ecology and evolutionary biology.

They visited the offices of representatives from eight states.

Kathleen Corcoran is Cornell’s media relations specialist in Washington, D.C.