

Beyond the Laboratory: Promoting Scientific Dialogue, from Puerto Rico to D.C. ^[1]

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La Dra. Frances Colón es Asesora en Ciencia y Tecnología para la Secretaria de Estado de los Estados Unidos.

There is no doubt that science and technology have a great impact on our lives. Transportation, media, medical advances and what we know about the Universe and the human body, are the result of scientific knowledge and its applications.

Science is also inseparable from the economy, politics, law and education. The decision-making process concerning the preservation of our ecosystems, or in which areas of research to invest funding in order to stimulate solutions to social problems, can and should be informed by scientific data.

Accordingly, there are hundreds of scientists and engineers from diverse disciplines that advise agencies, organizations and countries on the creation of science-related practices and policies; ensure proper communication between these entities and the scientific community; and advocate for resources and optimal conditions for the development of science. Oh! and it is worth mentioning, many of these scientists are Puerto Rican men and women.

What is Science Policy?

Science policy ^[5] is not to be confused with politics! It is not about votes, political parties or campaigns; rather it refers to the series of scientific objectives, rules and principles that organizations — be they governmental or non-for-profit — have established in order to accomplish those objectives. For example in the United States, 1 out of every 8 elderly people ^[6] suffers from Alzheimer ^[7]'s disease, posing a serious health problem in this country. As part of a strategy ^[8] to battle this disease, from 2012-2013 the US government— through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) — will increase by \$130 million its investments on Alzheimer's disease research .

Promoting Scientific Dialogue at the Department of State

Recently, a Puerto Rican scientist, Dr. Frances Colón ^[9] was selected to serve as the Deputy Science and Technology Advisor ^[10] for the Secretary of State of the United States, Hillary Clinton ^[11]. Her new responsibilities include the establishment of strategies to promote diplomacy through science and to support international scientific exchange.

Frances was born in the San Juan metro area, but “my family is from Culebra and my heart is [from] there. It's in my DNA,” she declares. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras, Frances completed her doctoral studies in neuroscience at Brandeis University in Massachusetts ^[12]. After finishing her doctorate, Frances was a Science and Technology Policy Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science ^[13], in a program that helps scientists participate in the development of science and technology policy.

At the beginning of her scientific career, Dr. Colón, did not have any plans to go into public policy and, in fact, did not know what it was. She recounts that her involvement in “extracurricular embelecocos [shenanigans]”, such as “STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), summer camps for Latina girls, political campaigns, leadership networks for Latinas like Las Comadres Para Las Américas ^[14], and the promotion of our arts and music,”

sparked her interest in this field at the intersection of science and society.

Frances tells us that she loves knowing that her job allows her to use innovation and scientific creativity as tools to improve the international relations of the United States and to find solutions to the diverse economic and social challenges that our society faces. She also says “it is an inspiration to know that I can serve as a role model to women in science and to the Latino community at large”.

Dr. Colón’s passion for her work shines through. “There are no typical days. One day I am meeting with Brazilian women scientists who want to reach leadership positions in their country; another day I’m traveling to Perú to promote a conservation project in the Amazon; and the following day I am writing parts of Secretary Clinton’s speeches. Every day is an adventure. I love what I do,” she states.

Reluctant to state whether she has ever had a bad day, because “even the worst day has its magic”, Dr. Frances Colón does not hesitate to recount her best day at work. “The day I met President Obama [15]. I was at the Summit [16] of the Americas in Trinidad as a control officer for the Secretary of Energy, Dr. Steven Chu [17]. I was able to get to know both. It was incredible.”

Though it may seem that she has reached the pinnacle of her career, Frances continues to be ambitious. “There is a part of me that would like to run for elected office in the future. [To] work more directly with the community, day to day and to use my experience to benefit Latinos in the United States and Puerto Rico, from here.”

Dr. Frances Colón finishes by explaining why it is important for scientists to get involved in public policy. “It is not possible to make good decisions for the common good of the people if these are not based on proven science. President Obama said: ‘The truth is that promoting science isn’t only providing financial resources, it is protecting free and open research. It is assuring that the results and evidence generated are not manipulated or covered up to benefit an ideology or for political gain. It is to listen to what are scientists are telling us, even though it may be inconvenient, especially when it is inconvenient.’ This is the slogan that guides my work every day.”

If you want to know more about Dr. Frances Colón [10]n and her work at the Department of State [10], you can visit here profile in CienciaPR.org [18].

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