ISEN Research Award Summary

The primary goal of the Science Policy and Action Network is to create a collaborative network between students, researchers, and faculty who are passionate about energy and sustainability (E&S). While the technology and business aspects of E&S are well represented on campus – embodied formally by McCormick and Weinberg graduate research efforts, ISEN, and research centers on campus; and informally by the Business of Energy and Technology of Energy student-led seminars – we identified policy as the clear missing link to complete the energy landscape at Northwestern.

The proposed goals of NUSPAN were to:

1. Identify relevant faculty at Northwestern, University of Chicago, and surrounding universities
2. Identify local resources geared towards advancing policy initiatives (The Scholar Strategy Network, Illinois Policy Council, etc.)
3. Engage representatives from the aforementioned institutions with researchers (student, postdoctoral, faculty)
   a. Host Workshops
   b. Brown Bag Lunches
   c. Formal Seminars
   d. Panel Discussions
4. Design and build a centralized location (likely a website hosted by NU) for accessing politically

To meet these goals over the last year, NUSPAN successfully hosted several speakers and events which bring the policy and social science aspects of E&S to the broader Northwestern community. All events were made possible by the support of the ISEN research grant, the Northwestern Sustainability Fund, and The Graduate School Professional Development Grant. Broadly, these events included: a lecture by Professor Jamie Druckman (Institute for Policy Research), seminar with Parag Gupta (Founder and CEO of Waste Ventures), a meet-up for volunteers at the American Association for the Advancement of Science national conference, and an information session on careers in science policy.
Notably, the ISEN award was instrumental in allowing NUSPAN to host Professor Arthur Lupia from the University of Michigan for a half-day graduate student workshop and an evening seminar open to all Northwestern students. Professor Lupia is the Hal R. Varian Collegiate Professor of Political Science, the chair of the American Association for the Advancement of Science Section on Social, Economic, and Political Sciences, and is a renowned communications expert. His global lectures draw from philosophical and scientific research to clarify how information and institutions affect policy and politics. The bulk of his work has focused on effectively communicating climate science to a broad audience. The half-day workshop, “Persuasion in Politics for Scientists: Workshop on Effective Communication of Science to Law and Policy Makers”, brought Professor Lupia along with LuCinda Hohmann, Midwest Campaign Manager for the Union of Concerned Scientists; Leslie Combs, District Director for Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (D-IL); and Alison Leipsiger, Legislative Director for State Senator Daniel Biss.

The workshop began with a lecture by Prof. Lupia on effective communication techniques. The 25 attendees learned about the role of pathos in memory formation and its relation to communicating science to a lay audience. Ms. Hohmann discussed the role of UCS in political advocacy and the focus of UCS on climate science and energy policy. Her brief overview of the political process also allowed the Ph.D. scientists in attendance to understand their place and role in affecting legislation. Finally, Prof. Lupia, Ms. Hohmann, Ms. Schakowsky, and Ms. Leipsiger met with small groups to students to discuss how to effectively hold a meeting with a congressperson or staffer. They provided feedback in role-playing exercises where the student presented a previously prepared response to one of five prompts. These prompts were developed to draw on the panelists’ expertise in national and local policy and to engage the students in areas about which they were passionate. For instance, one prompt focused on current efforts of the Illinois General Assembly to restructure Renewable Energy Standards Portfolio.

The interest in this workshop and the skills participants found most valuable underwrite the importance of the goals NUSPAN is working to fulfill. We found that most students attended this workshop for two reasons: 1) to gain a deeper understand of how scientists can positively affect public opinion; and 2) to explore career options post-graduation. These motives draw
attention to the lack of information currently provided in these areas and the necessity of continuing to offer such events.

The evening keynote, addressed towards undergraduate students, brought an interdisciplinary group of students (history, economics, science, engineering, etc.) to hear practical techniques for communicating in politicized environments. Like the workshop, examples in climate change were used to illustrate how scientific information is easily lost on a general audience if not conveyed in a way specific to the intended demographic.

The role of NUSPAN in engaging the Northwestern community extends beyond the impact of the workshop and keynote event. The connections built to State Senator Biss’ and Congresswoman Schakowsky’s offices open to the door to future collaborations. In particular, the current development of a Policy of Energy seminar series Northwestern Energy and Sustainability Consortium (a collaborative E&S organization of which NUSPAN is a part) was enabled and encouraged by the various events hosted by NUSPAN this academic year. Ms. Leipsiger has encouraged NUSPAN to reach out to her office to host Senator Biss to speak on his role in State-level E&S policy.

The workshop and keynote in conjunction with the additional events hosted by NUSPAN have encouraged students at all levels (undergraduate, Ph.D., MBA, etc.) to become engaged in a broader community of E&S.