

Tips for a Successful Tour of a Research Facility

By Rebecca Certner

Rebecca Certner is a graduate student at Northeastern University's Marine Science Center. In August 2013, Rebecca arranged a tour of the lab for her state senator as part of the Biological Sciences Congressional District Visits event. Here are some of the lessons she learned from the experience.

- Get the director involved. If possible, have the director of your research station or the chair of your department help lead the tour. It lent gravitas to the whole situation. Plus, mine has a lot of experience with policy, outreach, and giving group tours.
- Get your university's government representative involved. The Vice President for Government Relations also came on the tour with us. He helped to bridge the gap between the researchers and the visiting elected official.
- Give a tour of specific labs. We went into the lab that I work in and I was able to explain in detail what I do and why it's important. I also alerted a few other friends in different labs that we would be coming by so they were also able to contribute to the tour. It's good if everyone looks productive!
- A lot of the labs at my facility do ecological research right outside the building so it was also fun to show the state senator some field experiments that were ongoing. Obviously, this won't work for everyone and weather has a big impact. Finding unique things to showcase makes for a memorable tour.
- Talk about upcoming, exciting improvement happening at the facility or in the field. My lab is undergoing a lot of changes because the university decided a few years ago to put a lot of money into the space and coastal health research in general. This means we had a lot of new things to show the state senator. Since his constituency lives along a coastline he was particularly interested in the research we do directed at sustainability in coastal cities. I know this was unique to my lab but finding an angle that the politicians can relate to is key.
- It can be hard for scientists to break away from the nitty gritty details regarding their own research but it's important to remember that its hard for political-minded folks to relate to that area. On my tour, we focused a lot on the community outreach and education opportunities that my lab participates in. Showing the visitor that your facility benefits the community and his/her constituency makes for a better dialogue. Definitely talk about the science but keep it simple and to the point.
- Along those lines, it's also helpful to frame your research in monetary terms. For example, how the science being done helps the local economies. My lab has a lot of fisheries people so that was interesting to the state senator.
- The state senator that visited my facility is a big proponent of science and environmental health so we thanked him for his ongoing support. Nevertheless it is important to talk about specific pieces of legislation that impact your area of research and how it's important for politicians to keep providing funding. Government funding is still the lifeblood of basic biological research.