

Alumna leads strategic planning team at NOAA

By Erin Kelly

(November 20, 2012) Shelby Walker knows how to plan ahead. In fact, she's made a career of it.

A 2003 alumna of the Ph.D. program at VIMS, Walker is now the Strategic Planning Team Lead for the Office of Policy, Planning, and Evaluation within NOAA's Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research. Only 8 years after graduating, Walker has managed to acquire a wealth of experience and expertise in strategically planning future research initiatives.

"I deal primarily with planning NOAA's research line," says Walker. "My job requires me to look at what is currently being done research-wise, and take that information to plan future research for the years to come."

Walker is no stranger to the planning and management of groundbreaking research. Since her departure from VIMS, she has continued to add one prestigious position after another to her résumé.

Before joining NOAA in 2009, Walker served as the Associate Program Director for the National Science Foundation's Ocean Technology and Interdisciplinary Coordination Program, where she worked on launching NSF's Ocean Observatory Initiative—a project that she fondly recalls as the biggest accomplishment in her professional career. "Moving the OOI from the planning stage to actually getting it approved and ultimately getting it launched was huge for me," says Walker.

Prior to her work at NSF, Walker served as Project Manager for the Joint Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology (JSOST)—a body of 25 federal agencies that is responsible for creating a national strategy for ocean research, and for developing the technology needed to do move that research forward.

Before working at JSOST, Walker completed a National Research Council post-doctoral research associateship at the Naval Research Laboratory—a position she began following her service as a John A. Knauss Fellow in Washington D.C.

"I'm extremely supportive of the Knauss Fellowship," says Walker. "Even if I'd decided to go back to doing research instead of what I'm doing now, the fellowship would've still served me well because I got to see the other side of the equation in respect to grants and the decision-making process."

As a Knauss Fellow, Walker was placed in NSF's Division of Ocean Science where she was able to attend House and Senate briefings as well as meetings of the Ocean Research Leadership Council. It was during her time at NSF that she was initially exposed to the Ocean Observatory Initiative. "The Knauss Fellowship opened so many doors for me and it's something I think everyone should do if they have the opportunity."



Shelby Walker Ph.D. '03

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While at VIMS, Walker studied organic contaminants in highly industrialized urban estuaries. Having recently served on a detail to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force as one of the Science Coordination Team Leads following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010, her knowledge of environmental contaminants was put to work.

One of Walker's fondest memories from VIMS was when her advisor, the late professor of marine science Rebecca Dickhut, invited her down to Antarctica to serve as an extra pair of hands in one of Dickhut's research ventures. "That trip is one of my most vivid memories," she says. "To be able to go to the bottom of the world and have the experience that I did was one of the greatest opportunities that VIMS could have offered me."

Walker and Dickhut's research mainly focused on the geochemistry of organic contaminants, which led them to collaborate on a number of publications while Walker pursued her doctorate. "Even though Rebecca is gone, she was a huge influence on my work and my ability to grow as a scientist," says Walker.

Originally from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Walker developed a love for marine science by growing up in such close proximity to the ocean. After graduating from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, she spent 3 years working in environmental consulting, where she acquired the interest in environmental contaminants that eventually brought her to VIMS.

"I could feel that VIMS was the right fit for me to pursue graduate school," says Walker, who ended up bypassing her Master's degree and going straight for her Ph.D. "I liked the dynamic at VIMS. Everyone was very welcoming, so I knew it would be the right place for me."

Though she admits it wasn't always easy, Walker is glad she picked VIMS. "My education at VIMS was tremendous, despite the fact that my dissertation made me crazy at times," she laughs. "The faculty, the research, and the caliber of the institution made it all worth it."



Antarctica Trip: VIMS alumna Shelby Walker recalls her trip to Antarctica with the late VIMS professor Rebecca Dickhut as being her more vivid memory from her doctorate experience. Photo courtesy of Shelby Walker