

career paths

Dr. Beatriz Cuartas Provides Advice for PhD Students Considering a Career in Government



Beatriz Cuartas serves as Deputy Federal Program Manager at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Management and Budget's Learning and Career Management Office. In her role, she manages several of the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security (NNSA) portfolios. She has over 16 years of professional experience, 9 years in leadership positions, has authored two books, taught thousands of university students, and delivered 100+ government course sections in person and online. Dr. Cuartas also continues to contribute to NNSA's diversity through a significant increase in NGFP Hispanics (recorded at an historic 63% growth), and other minority recruitment.

What kind of work do you do with the National Nuclear Security Administration? What energizes you about your career?

I am currently the NGFP Deputy Federal Program Manager in the competitive service at the US Department of Energy (DOE), National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). I love my career because my NNSA people are my top motivators, and they are devoted to providing the best service for the greater good. My NNSA team is super engaging; we have idea meetings in which we bounce service project ideas amongst ourselves. Then, we go and get them done!

I am dedicated to my work because NNSA has a mission that I fully support. We are in the business of keeping our people, our country, and the world safe by safeguarding our nuclear stockpile. Also, I absolutely love working with my NNSA graduate fellows! They inspire me to give them my best. In my role, I get to recruit, develop, and retain the brightest and best talent while helping them build a career in the national security sector. I am energized because I know that what I do helps make the world a safer and better place.

Why and when did you choose to pursue a non-faculty career?

I was chosen to be a Presidential Management Fellow (PMF) and participating in the program changed my life forever! Through it, I completed the Leadership Development Program, rotated into the office of the Under-Secretary of Nuclear Security, and learned to love the professional opportunities that government service affords individuals. I have found that NNSA is the safest/best place to work! During the pandemic, I have been blessed with an environment that allows teleworking. I now work from home almost full-time. Additional federal service benefits provide great opportunities to all employees in times of need. In addition, I get to serve and get paid to do what I love. My pay today is significantly better than in academia (though not as high as it could be in the private sector).

In what ways did your doctoral training help you in your career? What did you study in graduate school? Can you say a little bit about your research?

I studied Latin American quality of life measures in the public policy PhD program at the Schar School of Policy and Government (George Mason University). In my view, this is the best policy graduate school in the country because of its people and their dedication to their work. There, I worked under the guidance of some amazing political scientists including Dr. Ken Reinert, Dr. Mark Thurston, Dr. Anne Baker, Dr. Laurie Schintler, Dr. Connie McNeely, Dr. Mark Rozell, Dr. Louise Shelley, and Dr. Jack Goldstone, to name a few of my favorite ones.

Each of my professors taught me several key lessons. First, they taught me excellence by example. They were the best in each of their fields and arrived there through hard work. They also taught me perseverance and the power of "sticking with it." There were so many times I wanted to give up. I remember crying at the dinner table in front of my

son, because it was not altogether clear to me how I was going to be able to finish my PhD. However, my professors saw my passion for the work, encouraged me, and were my allies in every way in overcoming my own challenges.

I owe them all a special thanks, and in particular, Dr. Reinert. His diligent work influenced me to become an avid reader and writer, which are key essentials to master in any career, especially government. A special note also goes to Dr. Baker because of her relentless ethics with respect to qualitative methods. If the method was not applied correctly, it did not pass the scientific test. Dr. Schintler taught me my love of statistics and a variety of statistical methods to understand a country's quality of life data, including geo-spatial analysis, factor analysis, and more. Finally, Dr. Thurston and his wife emphasized life balance, self-care and meditation.

And, at the very least, I owe my professional success to my dissertation committee, my schools, my teachers, and my family. Every day I write, present, analyze data, and teach. None of it would have been possible without the assistance of these people. My committee, school, and professors taught me invaluable lessons that I carry into my professional life today. My mother, my father, and my son have been my greatest supporters. For this, I thank them all.

Do you have any advice for PhD students considering a career in government?

1) Love the work you do & know your worth: This is a key lesson for any student. Do the work you love every day of your life and you will never work a single day. Frequently, PhDs and students in general exit university with great hopes for the future without properly considering how to translate their efforts into practice. Please take some time to mindfully consider all that you have invested into your education (time, money, effort, foregone opportunities). Consider the supply of your talent vs. the demand for it. Next, have an insightful internal conversation on what these efforts are worth to you. Then, write out what successful compensation looks like in relation to these efforts. For instance, make a list of the work-life balance, benefits, security, and pay you require. Then, match the public and private sector with your wish list. Finally, go out, interview, and negotiate with those who match your requirements best.

2) Smart/diligent work pays off: After all the hard work, all my struggles have formed into the beautiful river of my life. All that remains is a grateful, well-trained, and disciplined mind and body. I am a humble warrior who, after much pain and awareness, learned that accomplishment calls for sweat, tears, humility, and hope to end up with a bundle of joy and a life with purpose.

3) Persevere: Remember the power of sticking with it and keeping on with your journey regardless of the challenges. Water deep happy consciousness seeds in your mind that yield wonderful fruits for everyone. Persevere and you will cross to the other side of awareness where all suffering can be transformed into freedom, compassion, peace, and happiness.

4) Express gratitude: Every day I find at least one reason to express my infinite gratitude, which brings me and those around me boundless joy and peace. Often, my teachers, family, and everyone I know are in my gratitude exercise because it is thanks to them that I am alive and well.

5) Give back and pay it forward: One of my greatest sources of joy and accomplishment is to give back and pay it forward. My work with students, fellows, and new employees yields immeasurable fruits of joy and good will. I find that giving is the greatest act of kindness. In giving, I receive. I know happiness, peace, and freedom when I give myself, my work, and my belongings in order to work towards something greater than me. ■



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