

News Release

May 2, 2018

School of Nursing and Health Studies (SONHS)

Workshop Explores Politics of Promoting Nursing and Healthcare Research

Faculty gain insights from national nonprofit that reps the research pipeline in D.C.

Scientists and researchers work passionately and tirelessly to save lives, money, and time by investigating some of our most complex problems. But when it comes to advocating for the funding needed to support these critical efforts, they don't always "tell the right story."

That was one of the messages Suzanne Ffolkes, vice president of communications for the D.C.-area nonprofit alliance Research!America, shared Monday, April 23, at the School of Nursing and Health Studies (SONHS).

During her talk, "Maximizing the Health and Economic Impact of Nursing Research," Ffolkes addressed SONHS faculty members on how to improve government relations by telling the "right story" in the right way.

"It's very important for scientists to engage directly with policymakers," said Ffolkes, not just at the federal level, but at state and local levels as well. "The first thing you must do is convey that your mission helps to meet *their* needs. In that intersection is the 'narrative spark.'"

"As this event emphasized, it's so important for nurses and other healthcare professionals to work closely with legislators to support funding for programs that advance science and solutions," said Dean Cindy L. Munro. "We must be able to get across to busy politicians in just a few minutes the impact our work has on the lives of their constituents."

Ffolkes pointed to some good news – FY18 budget increases for the National Institutes of Health (up \$3 billion), National Institute of Nursing Research (up \$8 million from \$150 million in FY17), and Nursing Workforce Development Title VIII (up \$20 million) – but cautioned that a current push to cut up to \$60 billion from the \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending package could lead to decreases in domestic and discretionary budgets, which could negatively affect the NIH budget.

She had another warning too – advising faculty to choose grant titles and presentations carefully, keeping in mind that some politicians are on the hunt for federally funded grants they can spin to the media as frivolous or wasteful to back their arguments for cutting federal research dollars.

On the bright side, though, she noted more nursing schools are receiving Department of Defense dollars by showing the national security implications of their research (into infectious diseases like Ebola, for one example). "Think of expanded areas where your grant can fit," she said.

Displaying results from Research!America's joint 2018 survey with Zogby Analytics, Ffolkes said that while most U.S. adults on both sides of the political aisle believe public policies should be based on the best available science, the scientists doing that work remain, for the most part, invisible to the general public.

She presented five overall steps for productively engaging politicians, their constituents, and others who ultimately control the research purse strings: Build relationships, find common ground, share your passion, thank supporters, and hold elected officials accountable.

Ffolkes explained how researchers can follow an “aspirational” narrative of “Then, Now, Imagine” to give legislators one quick visual of how their work is poised to make a lasting difference. She demonstrated this with examples of SONHS faculty research that ranged from studying depression in Hispanic women to the effects of cannabis on cardiovascular health.

“Facts and rational analysis do not convince people to change behavior,” she stated. “If you want to change the narrative around a cause, you have to start by changing the way people feel.”

Concluding with some social media tips, Ffolkes reminded researchers to tag their political representatives on Twitter when posting research updates and suggested they consider using globally known hashtags like #MarchforScience at key moments to launch their own carefully crafted message to a broader audience.

Founded in 1989 to represent the research pipeline in Washington, D.C., Research!America is a 501c3 organization devoted to making research to improve health a higher national priority. Guillermo “Willy” Prado, dean of the Graduate School at the University of Miami, was recently elected a board member.

###