

Maximizing Impact in Government

[The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy](#) turns professionals into policy advocates.

We offer innovative training programs to equip leaders across sectors – from tech to climate, science to social impact – with the practical policy skills to craft solutions for society’s most pressing challenges. Based in the Bay Area, the Policy Academy is the first comprehensive nonpartisan and non-university training program in the United States offering a step-by-step process to learn practical strategies for policymaking. The Academy's predecessor, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub, has helped more than 500 alumni and staff gain government experience and seek policy impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Matthew Zhou leveraged his experience as a 2021 Aspen Tech Policy Hub Fellow to transition into a policy career. Now serving as the Assistant Chief Data Officer for the State of California, Matthew uses lessons he learned at the Hub on the job every day. His work primarily focuses on supporting the development of data standards and policy, harmonizing and modernizing data and analytics approaches across the state. Lately, this work has included informing key initiatives like Governor Newsom’s Executive Orders on Equity and GenAI.

BACKGROUND

Matthew has always had a love for solving seemingly intractable problems. After realizing he could apply his problem-solving mindset to problems that bridged technology, data science, and policy, he went looking for a way to upskill—and found the Aspen Policy Academy’s Tech Policy Fellowship.

The Fellowship profoundly shaped Matthew’s understanding of policy and his role in it as a technologist. He gained insight into how government functions and how

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technologists can embed themselves within different sectors to make a meaningful impact. Through conversations with his cohort and learning directly from experienced policy professionals, Matthew began to understand the complexities of introducing new technologies into governmental processes and how to address potential skepticism of policymakers.

“The Hub Fellowship was a pivotal experience that helped me transition into a policy career.”

Matthew Zhou

IMPACT

After leaving the Fellowship, Matthew felt empowered to create change at a broader level by entering public service. He understood the pain points of the public sector and used concrete strategies to overcome them: including critical skills like writing a policy memo, which he uses on a daily basis. Hearing from guest speakers and fellow techies interested in serving the community inspired him to take the leap. Without attending the Aspen Policy Academy, Matthew does not believe he would have made this career pivot.

As the Assistant Chief Data Officer for the State of California, Matthew now helps streamline data access, modernize data management and services, and accelerate the use of data in decision-making. Matthew is focused on building technology and policy solutions that address critical issues of privacy, ethics, and governance.

Matthew credits the Tech Policy Fellowship with giving him some of his most-used skills: stakeholder engagement and consensus building. His new process is centered on the end user: find the people interested in your solution, persuade them to support your solution, and continue building that consensus until you have a meaningful coalition for mass adoption.

The Fellowship and Academy’s focus on impact also helped Matthew understand the power of small, implementable changes. As Matthew discovered, there are many parallels between the policy world and the tech world, including minimizing the barriers to entry for constituents. Influencing policy requires making it as easy as possible for people to say “yes” and creating a measurable improvement on the user experience.

Going forward, Matthew aims to continue building bridges between technology and policy, particularly on privacy and governance issues in California. He envisions driving innovation in policy spaces while ensuring that the systems built are equitable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities.