ComSciCon-Chicago 2018

A report on the fourth annual Communicating Science Conference for graduate students in Chicago, Illinois

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Dear Valued Supporter,

We would like to begin by thanking you for your sponsorship! Because of your contribution, ComSciCon-Chicago 2018 was a great success. The organizing committee worked hard to create a weekend of informative and accessible events to teach skills for science communication. With an abundance of interest from local experts and nearly 100 graduate student applications, we continue to see a demand for our conference in the Chicago area. We hope to continue holding ComSciCon-Chicago in future years and would like to express our sincere appreciation for the financial sponsors that made this year possible.

This August, we built upon the previous workshop by creating a more dynamic experience. We had three panels and nine workshops over three breakout sessions concerning a wide variety of topics such as novel outreach, science policy, presentation skills, data visualization, and tailoring your message for the medium. In addition, we also introduced a greater variety of topics for our pop talks and expert editing session. We were also thrilled to host 21 expert panelists and workshop leaders including Dr. Danielle Lee, associate research professor at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville, as our keynote speaker. This year, we worked towards having a diverse group of speakers and attendees so that many perspectives could be heard, and great strides have been made to increase representation at this conference which will continue into the future.

As a local franchise of ComSciCon, we are committed to providing a first-class science communication conference organized for and by graduate students. Thanks to the overwhelming support in the Chicago science and science communication communities, this goal was achieved. The report that follows serves to summarize this year’s events, giving our supporters a glimpse of ComSciCon-Chicago 2018.

Sincerely,

The ComSciCon-Chicago 2018 Organizing Committee
Executive Summary

On August 25 and 26, 2018, the fourth annual ComSciCon-Chicago conference was held at the British International School of Chicago – Lincoln Park. From a competitive pool of applicants, 50 graduate students were selected to attend a weekend of writing, learning, and communicating science. Attendees learned concrete science communication skills from and were inspired by our lineup of panelists, workshop leaders, and expert editors. Thanks to generous funding from the University of Illinois at Chicago, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, Northern Illinois University, and The Field Museum, the conference was free to attendees.

Panels

Our event featured three panels on the topics of future careers, science policy, and novel ways of outreach. Eleven local experts of diverse expertise and background served as panelists, sharing their experiences and fielding questions from the audience.

Workshops

Attendees chose three of nine different workshops to attend over the two day event. Offerings were based on presentation skills, tailoring your message for the medium, and other various skills. All workshops were dynamic and interactive in nature, making them a favorite for many attendees.

Write-a-Thon

Attendees workshopped an original piece of non-technical writing. Peers gave online comments prior to conference weekend, after which an expert reviewer of the ten that joined us on day 2 gave feedback.

Pop Talks

No ComSciCon would be complete without Pop Talks! Each attendee and organizer gave an impromptu, one minute summary of their research without using scientific jargon. During the talks, the audience flashed “Awesome” and “Jargon” cards that gave immediate feedback to the speaker.

Keynote

We were honored to host Dr. Danielle Lee as our keynote speaker this year. In addition to researching the behavior of African pouched rats, Dr. Lee is committed to bringing science to a wider audience particularly to under-represented and under-served groups. She is a National Geographic Explorer and a TED fellow and contributed to the blog The Urban Scientist hosted at Scientific American. This year she spoke about personally delivering science to one’s community.
The Organizing Committee

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Chemistry

Abdel Halloway, Treasurer
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Biological Sciences

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Brittany Maule
Green Seal
Prior: Ball State University
Attendees

A Diversity of Institutions

We were pleased to have nearly 100 applications for 50 conference spots this year. Admittance was competitive, and our attendees are both highly qualified and motivated to be excellent science communicators. Attendees came from 12 different universities and 6 different states.

ComSciCon-Chicago attendees represented the following institutions:

- University of Illinois at Chicago
- Northwestern University
- University of Chicago
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Notre Dame University
- Purdue University
- University of Wisconsin – Madison
- Indiana University
- Indiana University – Purdue University
- Indianapolis
- North Dakota State University
- Iowa State University
- Columbia University

Degrees & Disciplines

We were thrilled to have attendees from a large variety of scientific backgrounds. 47 fields were represented, adding to the rich and interdisciplinary nature of the event. The word cloud (left) shows all disciplines represented at our event. Attendees represented multiple different programs and stages of graduate school, including early PhD students (1-3 years), late PhD students (4 years), and Master’s students.

With such diversity of expertise, we often found that practicing good science communication started at breakfast and endured throughout the weekend.
Activities

Keynote

This year’s keynote speaker was Dr. Danielle Lee, associate professor at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville (right). In addition to researching the behavior of African pouched rats, she is committed to bringing science to a wider audience particularly to under-represented and under-served groups. She is a National Geographic Explorer and a TED fellow and contributed to the blog The Urban Scientist hosted at Scientific American.

The title of her talk for this year was Building Personal Bridges: Connecting Your Science to Your Communities.

Abstract

Science career landscapes may feel rather uncertain right now; however, the need for science outreach to the general public is greater than ever. Communicating science in the 21st century means broadening science participating on every level: media producers, communicators, and consumers. Effective science outreach and communication requires authentic connections with audiences to attract participation and participation from wider demographics. Owning your identity and using at as your center is the key to connecting your science to wider more diverse audiences and serving traditionally under-served groups.

Panels

Panels were discussions on specific topics in science communication with leading experts from the greater Chicago area. Each panel was an hour long and included a question and answer in which attendees could ask questions about the panelists’ areas of expertise. The panels are as follows:

Panel 1: Breaking Up with the Bench
Jay Goodwin, MacArthur Foundation
Rabiah Mayas, Northwestern University’s Science in Society
Ben Marcus, CG Life
Rob Arthur, Freelance Journalist
Panel 2: Science Policy
Erika Salomon, Center for Data Science and Public Policy at the University of Chicago’s
Tran Nguyen, Aide to U.S. Senator Dick Durbin
Monica Metzler, Executive Director of the Illinois Science Council

Panel 3: Novel Outreach in Science (pictured)
Eric Henderson, Science Riot Inc.
Jim Daley, Freelance Science Journalist
Brian Nord, Fermilab and Kavli Institute for Cosmological Physics at the University of Chicago
Jennifer Ward, Children’s Book Author

Workshops

Workshops are 2 hour sessions designed to teach our attendees the skills necessary for science communication and professional development in a hands-on and interactive manner. Each workshop is grouped together with two other workshops in breakouts.
**Workshop Session 1: Special Topics**

**Data Visualization**  
Led by Alessandro Febretti of Citadel

**Developing a Communication Plan**  
Led by Jennifer Caddick of the Alliance for the Great Lakes

**Making Your Audience the Main Character in the Narrative of Science**  
Led by Chris Bresky of the Adler Planetarium

**Workshop Session 2: Skills for Presenting Science**

**Stand Up Comedy for Scientists**  
Led by Tyler Ross of Laugh Out Loud Theater

**Theatrically Speaking (pictured)**  
Led by Byron Stewart of the McCormick School of Engineering at Northwestern University

**Improv for Presenting Science**  
Led by Rachael Mason of The Second City and Columbia College Chicago

**Workshop Session 3: Medium for the Message**

**The Craft of Scientific Storytelling**  
Led by Elizabeth Lenaghan of the Graduate Writing Place and Northwestern University,

**Low Budget Video Production: Tips and Tricks for Science Communication**  
Led by Sheheryar Ahsan of The Field Museum

**Podcasting**  
Led by Greta Johnsen of WBEZ and the Nerdette Podcast

**Write-a-Thon**

Before the conference, attendees were asked to submit a piece of non-technical writing on a science topic of their choice. A new addition this year was that attendees could choose from 3 different genres of writing: writing for a non-technical audience, writing a pitch to an editor at a publication, and writing for audio and visual media. Attendees’ pieces underwent a thorough review process with one round of peer review and one round of expert review. Writing tutorial experts offered professional advice on attendees’ original pieces. After reviewing written pieces in the morning, experts met in small groups with attendees to provide face-to-face feedback.
Pop Talks

Attendees were allowed to put what they had learned from their presentation skills workshop to the test as they gave pop talks on their research. These pop talks are spontaneous and only allowed to last a minute with presenters randomly assigned an audience to whom they should tailor their talk. Example audiences were journalists, kindergartners, retirees, and lawmakers. This gave our attendees the opportunity to practice speaking to an unfamiliar audience and think about how to frame their message so their audience would be receptive.
Agenda and Schedule

Day 1

Morning

8:00 Check-In and Breakfast
8:45 Opening Remarks
9:15 Panel 1: Breaking Up with the Bench
10:15 Break
10:30 Workshop Session 1: Special Topics

Afternoon

12:30 Lunch
1:15 Panel 2: Science Policy
2:15 Break
2:30 Workshop Session 2: Skills for Presenting Research
3:30 Keynote by Dr. Danielle Lee
4:30 Reception

Optional Dinner Outing

Day 2

Morning

8:30 Check-In and Breakfast
9:15 Pop Talks – Round 1
9:45 Panel 3: Novel Outreach in Science
10:45 Break
11:00 Pop Talks – Round 2
11:30 Lunch

Afternoon

12:15 Workshop Session 3: Medium for the Message
2:15 Break
2:30 Pop Talks – Round 3
3:00 Write-a-Thon
3:30 Reception

5:00 Closing Remarks
Feedback

Immediately after ComSciCon-Chicago 2018, a survey was sent out to all attendees regarding the event. We had an approximately 60% percent response rate and received overwhelmingly positive feedback with over 96% of applicants feeling more motivated in their career aspirations after attending the conference.

Testimonials

“I think the entire conference completely exceeded my expectation. It was a wonderful weekend filled with so much love and knowledge. Everyone there was there to genuinely help one another and that was so exciting!”

“These were GREAT. I want to take the concept back to my department because this made the elevator pitch process actually enjoyable.” – Pop Talks

“This presenter was clearly an experienced teacher and was well prepared to fill two hours with interesting activities. Although I have taken several [science communication] improv classes, hers had innovative twists that made them new. She also did a fantastic job of tying in the REASON for doing the exercise...hard to do for most people except for a seasoned pro. She was fantastic.” – “Improv for Presenting Science” Workshop

“This was far and away the best panel! I loved hearing about different approaches and hearing about different peoples' work outside of academia. Brian Nord's advice was particularly valuable, about engaging empathy and how to not treat "diversity" as a virtue signal.” – Panel 3: Novel Outreach in Science

“I was very impressed at your teamwork, openness, and efforts to make accessibility to all participants. You have fine team. Again, thank you so much!”
Our Sponsors

ComSciCon-Chicago 2018 was generously supported by:

- University of Illinois at Chicago Graduate College
- University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology
- University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Biological Sciences
- University of Illinois at Chicago College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
- Northwestern University McCormick School of Engineering
- Northwestern University CIERA
- Northwestern University Department of Communications – Media, Technology, and Science
- Northwestern University GLAC
- University of Chicago GRAD Council
- University of Chicago myCHOICE
- Northern Illinois University Graduate School
- Northern Illinois University Department of Biological Science
- The Field Museum