

Academics grapple with balancing their research with the need to communicate it to the public

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Researchers today more than ever focus their work on real-world problems, often times making their research relevant to the public locally, regionally and sometimes nationally. But engaging the public in their research can be a daunting task for researchers both professionally and personally.

Leah Gerber, an Arizona State University associate professor in the School of Life Sciences and a senior sustainability scientist in the School of Sustainability, has identified impediments to productive [science communication](#) and she shared her recommendations at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Gerber's talk, "Confronting Institutional Barriers to Science Communication and Policy," was presented on Feb. 16.

As a researcher, Gerber and her group at ASU develop [mathematical approaches](#) that bring together the best available scientific information to make rational, efficient conservation decisions about endangered species recovery, ecosystem management and reserve design for oceans and fisheries. Getting that information to the public is a key component in her work.

Gerber said barriers to communicating science include a lack of reward for engaging the public and decision-makers on science, limited communications training, and time pressures faculty members face while

trying to obtain tenure. Other barriers include the researchers needing to prioritize their commitments, understanding the value in communicating their work to the public, and they may need to push their comfort zone (and stand in front of a camera, for example).

While the culture is slowly changing within academic institutions, success in higher education still is largely measured by publications and grants, which demand large amounts of time. Gerber says new institutional incentives need to be developed and implemented.

"We must find a way to make engagement rise to the top of the pile," Gerber said.

Gerber said some other institutional changes need to be made as well. For example, new accounting measures need to be developed for faculty who engage the public and their outreach work needs to be part of their evaluations (in addition to the standard grants and publications measures); communications training should become part of leadership programs for scientists; time should be given for professors to develop relationships with media; and boundary organizations should be developed, she said.

Provided by Arizona State University

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