# Internship prepares scientists in training to communicate with the public

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a stark reminder of the importance of keeping lines of communication open between scientists and the lay public and the dangers of failing to do so.

In a recent article in the *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* (*JCTS*), an MUSC team describes an internship in the College of

Graduate Studies (CGS) that aims to build lay communication skills in scientists in training.

"Communication and trust between scientists and the lay public is not as good as it could be," said Kimberly McGhee, Ph.D., a professional science writer with the South Carolina Clinical & Translational Research Institute (SCTR), College of Graduate Studies director of science communication initiatives and lead author of the article. "We're trying to teach scientists in training to provide good, solid information about science in a lay-friendly way to address gaps and restore trust."

"By showing that scientists don't have an ulterior motive and are not too snooty to sit down and say 'let me explain this to you,' the interns can change minds," said Paula Traktman, Ph.D., CGS dean and senior author of the article.

Since its start in 2016, over 25 graduate students and postdoctoral fellows have participated in the Science Writing Initiative for Trainees (SC-SWIFT) program. Interns are mentored by McGhee and Matthew Greseth, Ph.D., a scientist himself, who also serves as CGS assistant director of science communication initiatives, editor of the CGS Speaks blog and co-author of the article. The interns have written more than 100 EurekAlert! releases and MUSC Catalyst News stories. EurekAlert! is a science news site that is run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and releases posted there can help researchers to reach a broader audience for their work.

The internship is a collaboration between the CGS, the Office of Communications and Marketing and SCTR.

"Kimberly McGhee and I discussed how beneficial it would be to improve the ability of scientists to discuss their work in lay-friendly terms," said chief communications and marketing officer Shelia

Champlin, a co-author of the article. "When I suggested focusing on training graduate students and postdocs, Kimberly immediately recognized the potential of the idea, and she has fostered a tremendously successful collaboration among the Office of Communications and Marketing, Paula Traktman and the College of Graduate Studies."

That collaboration has now extended to SCTR. "The ripple effects of the internship are many," said Tammy Loucks, Ph.D., SCTR science development officer and a co-author of the article. "These include wider dissemination of research findings beyond the boundaries of traditional biomedical journals and increased recognition of study teams and institutions that have spearheaded this work."

In addition to championing SC-SWIFT, Traktman was so convinced of the importance of building science communication skills that she made it one of the four tracks of her T32 training grant "Cellular, Biochemical and Molecular Sciences Training Program: Developing the skills and expertise needed for a changing biomedical landscape." To date, seven of the eight T32 trainees, including Alhaji Janneh, have opted for the communications track.

"Before this internship, it was difficult for me to explain my research to my mom," said Janneh. "However, this writing internship has helped my communication skills and improved my ability to explain complicated science effectively to a lay audience, including my mom."

Intern Catherine Mills believes that SC-SWIFT helps students and fellows not only to communicate more effectively with a lay audience but also with scientists from other disciplines or those unfamiliar with their work. She discovered this to be true while sharing her science during MUSC's Research Day.

"If you can explain your science and your audience has a better

understanding of what you're talking about, you're going to get a better response," she said.

SC-SWIFT also opens doors for students and fellows to seek diverse career paths related to science communication.

"This is a career, not just a skill," said Greseth. "Yes, we're exposing students to the writing component on a weekly basis, but we're also hosting different seminars and networking events for interns. Once every six weeks or so, we have a speaker come in and talk about their real-world job."

Intern Julia Lefler did not know science writing was a career option until becoming an intern.

"Through doing this internship and falling in love with that aspect of things, it's definitely made me consider a career path in science writing," said Lefler.

SC-SWIFT is continually growing and hopes to offer digital media and visual communication opportunities for its trainees in order to reach broader audiences. The team also plans to offer a digital badge in science communications in the near term and eventually a certificate program.

"We serve the public and are supported by the public," said Traktman. "Since we want to increase the knowledge worldwide about science, it's incredibly important to train scientists to communicate more effectively with people."

**More information:** Kimberly McGhee et al, Creating an amateur press corps of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to cover breaking science and improve lay-writing skills, *Journal of Clinical and*

*Translational Science* (2021). DOI: 10.1017/cts.2021.829