New class teaches graduate students how to share their research with the public

One of the unfortunate side effects of tackling complicated scientific problems for researchers can be explaining their work to journalists, public relations staff or even their friends and family. What they discuss freely with their colleagues can be inaccessible to the average citizen.

But UGA professor Kathrin Stanger-Hall is trying to change that. Her new class, “Science Communication,” provides graduate students with the tools they need to share their research without reservation.

https://news.uga.edu/science-communications-class/
“It is important for scientists to be able to describe their research to a wide audience and to explain how science shapes our daily lives,” said Stanger-Hall, an associate professor of plant biology in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences. “With our seminar, we are offering graduate students insight into how to communicate their research to nonscientists, and we give them opportunities to practice these skills.”

Putting the theory from their assigned readings and class discussions into practice, Stanger-Hall’s students participate in a variety of simulated communication scenarios. They give mock interviews to journalism students, practice writing news releases, discuss their work with UGA public relations specialists, give poster presentations and learn to use multimedia, social media and much more.

“In science, they never really teach you how to talk to people. You are just expected to figure that out after you collect your data and you need to present it,” said Caitlin Ishibashi, a first-year doctoral student in plant biology. “We are holed up in our labs and our offices, and we assume that nobody outside our department will be interested in what we are doing so we do not make any effort aside from conferences and maybe some outreach sources.”

Stanger-Hall’s course is part of an effort led by a group of UGA communications professionals and faculty to provide training and other resources that help researchers improve their science communication skills. Upcoming activities include a three-minute thesis competition, sponsored by the Graduate School, in which doctoral students will present their research in 180 seconds to a panel of nonspecialist judges for a chance to win a cash prize.

On April 27, a workshop sponsored by the Postdoctoral Association will offer training in research presentation and communication for postdocs and graduate students. The workshop is part of the first quarterly UGA Researcher Orientation and Ongoing Training Series.

The Office of the Vice President for Research has developed a website (http://ovpr.uga.edu/communications/resources-researchers/) with resources for students, graduate students, postdocs and faculty researchers who want to improve their science communication skills. There they can find information on UGA workshops, courses and seminars on communicating science, and links to books, audio, video and webpages dedicated to helping them present and explain their work to a wide and diverse audience.

UGA faculty, staff and students who are actively engaged in promoting science communication or who would like to suggest additional resources for publication on the web page are encouraged to contact Terry Hastings in the Office of Research Communications (thasting@uga.edu).

Stanger-Hall hopes that improving the way scientists communicate not only will convey the excitement of individual researchers’ discoveries at the university and demonstrate the breadth and impact of UGA research across its colleges, research centers and institutes, but also increase the quality of public scientific discourse.