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Contribution: It Works For Us, Collaboratively

Hal Blythe & Charlie Sweet, Editors

Student Poster Presentations as a Venue for Personal and Professional Growth

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The sciences, under the auspices of the National Science Foundation, are currently emphasizing student research and student poster presentations as a method of sponsoring deeper student-advisor collaborations and fully developing the next generation of scientists. Graduate students have traditionally presented at scientific conferences, but undergraduate research is receiving increasing emphasis. I continue to embrace both the method and goal of the endeavor by requiring both undergraduate and graduate students to produce several poster presentations during their collaboration with me. Moreover, I hope that poster presentations hone skills and instill confidence so that students also become effective speakers and writers as they continue with life and career. Disciplines other than the sciences also recognize the many strengths of student poster presentations in a variety of both informal and formal venues.

Poster presentations offer a non-threatening way of encouraging students to present their research and to develop communication skills. The posters require ardent preparation but this is mitigated by the need to only *talk to individuals*, rather than *present to an audience*. The bar is perceived as lower, but all the thought, effort, and skill necessary for an oral presentation also pours into creating that poster. My particular shortcoming in developing as a student scientist was my inability to communicate verbally. My presentations in class were typically roughshod

and stilted. My obvious lack of success lead me to shake in my shoes when considering presenting at a scientific conference. So much so, that I actually read my first conference presentation and violated that first principle of presenting (other than being unclothed in front of an audience...a common nightmare!). Looking back over the years, how I wish that poster presentations were common in those days, because they provide an almost painless stepping stone to higher levels of verbal scientific communication.

What is our process in creating student poster presentations? Much to the surprise of my students, we typically start at least a full month before the conference. In our first meeting, we compose the layout of the poster and its contents, all of which will support the abstract heretofore submitted to the conference sponsors. We meet one or twice a week thereafter, being sure to outline what needs completion at each step. My students are shocked (and perhaps irritated) at the level to which I immerse myself in their creation: add a comma, remove a phrase, alter a figure, increase the font size. But they also become increasing fond of their creation and proud of their final product.

The process is not yet complete with only our on-campus efforts, because poster and student must succeed at the meeting. Many times we as student and advisor travel together, and this offers an additional opportunity to explore the nuances of the student's research and place it in the context of a larger whole. In other words, we get their head in the game! In order to foster confidence, I generally help students set up at the conference, and deliver a prideful statement or two. Then it's time to let them fly on their own so I melt away into the background fervor of the meeting to perhaps check in every now and then. Each of my students prosper academically with this preparation template, and each successive poster becomes easier than the last to create.

My experience is that students acquire organizational, cognitive, and scientific skills with this process. They learn that not all data are equal in quality or application. They learn first-hand the pieces of any scientific communication whether poster or paper, and how to construct a persuasive argument as the poster transitions from one panel's content to another. Finally, they develop composure and confidence as they *earn* self-esteem with their efforts.

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