

Public Engagement for Scientists, Brooke Smith, Kavli Foundation

Smith described how the Kavli Foundation is dedicated to advancing science for the benefit of humanity, promoting public understanding of scientific research, and supporting scientists in general.

To provide context on the relationship between scientists and the public, Smith shared some data from a report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. They found that 52% of people had nothing come to mind when they thought of “scientific research” or “scientific advances and discoveries.” Only one in four Americans thought the government’s role in science is indispensable.

To expand the conversation, the Kavli Foundation brought together four different communities in science communication for a series of studies: science communications trainers, scientific society representatives, university staff members, and science communications facilitators.

From interviews with trainers, they learned that there are a number of training opportunities for scientists but scientists often lack practical ways to exercise those skills. The researchers identified a lack of diversity in who is trained, who the trainers are, and the audiences the communicators are speaking to. In response, COMPASS and the Alan Alda Center are developing a community of practice for trainers and organizing a summit for them.

Scientific societies reported their top objectives were demonstrating the community’s ability to solve real problems, framing research results to resonate with the public’s values, and showing the community cares about societal well-being. These were almost opposite of scientists’ objectives of informing people, defending science from bad information, and getting people interested or excited about science. The only commonality was that both put hearing what others’ think and demonstrating the scientific community as listening as dead last. In response, several scientific societies have hired a Civic Science Fellow to follow up on the issue.

Through focus groups with university staff members, researcher found a conflict between what early career scientists said and university leadership did. While early career scientists wanted to do outreach, they felt that the university wasn’t supporting them. University leadership saw public engagement as a core part of their mission and assumed that they were supporting it. In response, the National Academies is doing a summit on academic career advancement that includes public engagement and other non-research, non-teaching roles.

The facilitators study – which included the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the MIT Lab for Innovation Science and Policy – found that these organizations focus on humanizing scientists. However, they lack coordination and a clear career path or professional development for this type of work.

In the question and answer session, Smith emphasized the importance of listening to audiences, picking goals first, and hiring communicators who are part of the audience. Speaking about helping institutions and leadership understand the broader picture, she pointed to a program at MIT to help scientists know about current events related to their science. She also highlighted the importance of leadership putting funding aside for communications.

The reports that resulted from the Kavli workshops are posted on [Support Systems for Scientists' Communication and Engagement](#).