

# Chatting Up Chemistry

Chemists: **JUNK THE JARGON** so that you can share your passion with those outside of the chemistry choir

IVAN AMATO, C&EN WASHINGTON

**IF COMEDIAN** Rodney Dangerfield were still alive, he would commiserate with C&EN readers. "I tell yuh," he would say in a gruff New York accent and with a jerk of his head, "chemistry don't get no respect."

This is a huge and chronic dilemma for the chemistry community. Scan the major media outlets and you will find out plenty about planets, black holes, genes, and stem cells, but precious little about the latest and greatest that chemists have to offer. Worse, if you do read about chemistry on these venues, there's a good chance the story is about an industrial accident or environmental concern. Those are legitimate stories, but they squeeze out the chemistry community's more uplifting tales.

Exacerbating the Dangerfield lament is shared memories by too many of your neighbors, friends, and relatives of regrettable chemistry classroom experiences, rife with impenetrable teaching, bad grades, and chemophobia-evoking odors. For much of the public, the periodic table stands as an icon of fear and loathing rather than as a reminder of the vast scientific and technological achievement that has gone into its making and that derives from its application.

There's more bad news. Chemists can talk a mile-a-minute among themselves, nodding knowingly even when using hypersyllabic strings referring to their favorite compounds and laboratory techniques. But that kind of talk, as is, makes the rest of the world nod off, complete with nightmares about what all of the jargon actually might mean. When it comes to communicating about their own discipline's laudable and pivotal place in the history of the world and humanity, chemists most often don't get passing grades.

**NONE OF THIS** litany of woe is news, of course, and the chemistry community has been trying to earn the public's interest and respect. Many American Chemical Society presidents have identified better communication about chemistry's societal contributions as a priority of their tenure. Each year, the society's National Chemistry Week reaches out to the masses with pedagogical messages. Dow Chemical has invested millions of dollars in its Human Element ad campaign to remind readers of the *New Yorker* and *Atlantic* magazines, for example, that "science is in the business of solving problems." And the American Chemistry Council, a major chemistry trade group, has had its industry-wide Essential, campaign to demonstrate, in ACC's words, "that chemistry is essential to safety, health, innovation, the environment, the economy... essential to our lives."



*Chemistry Communication Leadership Institute participants take a break in front of Drumheller Fountain at the University of Washington, Seattle.*

COURTESY OF DEBORAH ILLMAN

And sometimes you run across grassroots initiatives.

Last month, at the University of Washington (UW), Seattle, a select group of 15 early-career chemists from around the country gathered for a first-of-its-kind Chemistry Communication Leadership Institute. Small as it was, it is the sort of effort that could catalyze a cultural change

in the chemistry community. Sponsored by the National Science Foundation, ACS, and UW, the five-day institute—with follow-on components throughout the year—is the brainchild of Deborah L. Illman, a Ph.D. chemist and a former C&EN reporter, who has been teaching and studying science communication at UW for more than a decade. Full disclosure: I enthusiastically participated as a speaker at the institute to describe a "journalist's world" to the group.

It was an ambitious program. Participants learned how journalists work; where their ideas come from; how they pitch, write, and edit stories; and how public relations and public information officers fit into the communication process. They learned about science blogs and the differences between print and radio communication. Attendees interviewed UW scientists in mock press conferences. They had to write and produce engaging "elevator talks" about their work. They were even subjected to actors simulating tough-to-handle interviewees.

Preliminary feedback suggests the experience might have been transformative for some participants. David Co, a postdoc at Argonne-Northwestern Solar Energy Research Center, said, "We are all very inspired to go back and actually do something." Michael Tarselli, a research associate at Scripps Research Institute, in Florida, said that "this course helped me to bolster my research career with new written, spoken, and digital ways to reach out to the wider world about my science. It was fantastic."

Meanwhile, ACS is taking one of its largest steps ever to get its members into their local communities to tell stories about what they do. At the national meeting in August, 1,300 attendees signed up to serve as "Chemistry Ambassadors," willing and ready to chat up chemistry in everyday contexts such as high schools and libraries. Just as the institute was getting under way at UW, Chemistry Ambassadors program coordinator Nancy Blount received the first public request for the service from a Bellevue, Wash., high school physics teacher who was orchestrating a science careers forum.

I tell yuh, these kinds of efforts could be just the way for the chemistry enterprise to get a little more respect.

*Views expressed on this page are those of the author and not necessarily those of ACS.*