New AGU Mass Media Fellow Initiated College Science Communication Course

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Marissa Weiss, this year's AGU Mass Media Fellow, feels so strongly about communicating science that she and a fellow graduate student started a course on the subject. Three years ago, she and the other student in the biogeochemistry and environmental biocomplexity program at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., developed—with the aid of mentors—a semester-long science communication class.

The course has since become a regular offering at Cornell, where Weiss defended her dissertation in ecology this past August. A soil ecologist, Weiss showed in her thesis research that nitrogen pollution can cause slowing of soil decomposition because of a declining abundance of microbes that break the soil down.

In the communication course, Weiss and her fellow students learned to write opinion pieces, pitch their research to newspapers to learn how to solicit coverage, maintain blogs, produce podcasts, and present their research on a local radio show. She and her colleagues even wrote a letter to the editor, published in Science, about their course in which they encouraged other graduate programs to include science communication training and advised them on how to make that training a success (see Science, 316(5828), 1122, 25 May 2007).

For most beginning researchers, taking such a communication course would have been enough. For Weiss, though, it was just an appetizer. Last year, she applied to be, and was accepted as, AGU's 2010 Fellow in the Science and Technology Mass Media Fellows program run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "While some may argue that research scientists don't really need more than basic communication training because relatively little of our time is spent doing public outreach, I think I am likely to allocate more time to public outreach if I have the training and ability to do it well," Weiss wrote in a September post on an AGU blog called The Pla$ tspoken Scientist (http://blog.agu.org/sciencecommunication).

The Mass Media Fellows program, in which AGU has sponsored a fellow for the past 13 years, places young scientists at news organizations of many types (newspapers, radio, television, online), both large and small, to spend 10 weeks working as reporters. For the scientists, who are usually graduate students or newly minted Ph.D.s, it is an immersion program meant to help them learn from the inside how science journalism works and to thereby become better communicators, as well as to enhance the science expertise—at least temporarily—of news organizations that accept fellows.

—Peter Weiss, Public Information Manager, AGU; E-mail: pweiss@agu.org

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■ 19–21 January 2011 Eleventh National Conference on Science, Policy and the Environment: Our Changing Oceans, Washington, D.C., USA. Sponsors: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; The Ocean Foundation; Coca-Cola; others. (Conference Manager, National Council for Science and the Environment (NCSE), 1101 17th St., NW, Ste. 230, Washington, DC 20036, USA; Tel.: +1-202-530-5810; Fax: +1-202-628-4311; E-mail: info@NCSEonline.org; Web site: http://ncseonline.org/conference/Oceans/)

This conference will bring together scientists, policy makers, university faculty and students, and educated citizens from a wide range of disciplines to share their perspectives on the crisis facing our oceans, the knowledge and tools needed to face the challenge, and the policies and governance necessary to restore and protect the oceans.

■ 7–11 March 2011 42nd Lunar and Planetary Science Conference, Woodlands, Texas, USA. Sponsors: Lunar and Planetary Institute; NASA. (Kécia Mallette, Universities Space Research Association/Lunar and Planetary Institute, Houston, Texas, USA; Tel.: +1-281-486-2183; E-mail: kmallette@hou.usra.edu; Web site: http://www.lpi.usra.edu/meetings/lpsc2011/)

This conference will bring together international specialists in petrology, geochemistry, geophysics, geology, and astronomy to present the latest results of research in planetary science.

■ 3–5 April 2011 National Brownfields Conference, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. Sponsors: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; International City/County Management Association (ICMA); Center for Public Environmental Oversight; others. (Roy Seneca, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA; Tel.: +1-215-814-5567; E-mail: seneca.roy@epa.gov; Web site: http://www.brownfields2011.org/en/home)

This conference will focus on economic and environmental revitalization, including cleaning up and redeveloping abandoned, underutilized, and potentially contaminated properties.

■ 11–14 April 2011 International Conference on the Status and Future of the World's Large Rivers, Vienna, Austria. Sponsors: International Association for Hydro-Environment Engineering and Research; International Association of Hydrological Sciences; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); others. (Helmut Habersack, Muthgasse 107, Vienna A-1190, Austria; Tel.: +43-131-8990-0100; Fax: +43-131-8990-0149; E-mail: worldslargerivers@boku.ac.at; Web site: http://worldslargerivers.boku.ac.at)

This conference will provide a global forum for a wide-ranging discussion on key issues related to research on large rivers such as likely anthropogenic impacts, restoration potential and associated challenges, and effective and sustainable management.