

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE OCEANOGRAPHY SOCIETY

Oceanography

CITATION

Stamieszkin, K., M.A. May, and A. Chase. 2016. Student-led retreats for graduate student cohesion and career success. *Oceanography* 29(1):80–81, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2016.18>.

DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2016.18>

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Marine Science Professional Development Club retreat at the University of Maine's Darling Marine Center. The topic of this retreat was communicating research to broad audiences. In the photo, graduate students hold storyboards on their research that were products of a storytelling exercise.

Student-Led Retreats for Graduate Student Cohesion and Career Success

By Karen Stamieszkin, Melissa A. May, and Alison Chase

After several years in the nonacademic working world, we were back in school, ready to learn and socialize with other burgeoning marine scientists. Within our first couple of weeks in the University of Maine's (UMaine's) School of Marine Science (SMS) graduate program, we eagerly attended the new graduate student orientation. Program requirements were reviewed, as well as expectations and funding, but the one thing that excited the faculty and the new students most was the Graduate Student Symposium. With promise of revelry, sharing research, department-provided refreshments, a bonfire, and a stay-over at the University's Darling Marine Center, the symposium was touted as the social and academic event of the year. The entire department, which is usually spread out over the Orono campus and three other locations across the state of Maine, is together for one and a half productive and fun-filled days. The kicker: we had to wait until the end of the academic year, two whole semesters, for this joyous occasion.

As we marched into the fall semester, our minds were consumed with course material, exams, and research. We forgot about the symposium; chances to interact as a cohesive student body were few and far between. Before we knew it, spring semester had come and gone, and the symposium was upon us. It was indeed the event of the year, and was the first chance we had to meet and socialize with all of the program's 50+ graduate students. At the 2013 symposium's

student-only meeting, many agreed that we needed the opportunity to gather before the end of the year. Shortly after, a few of the faculty urged us to hold a student retreat to enhance student body cohesion. We decided to seize this opportunity to explore the scary and ever-present "dark cloud" of post-graduation careers as a group. The Marine Science Professional Development Club (MSPDC) at UMaine was born.

The goal of the MSPDC is to provide two days of activities that teach SMS students the skills that are necessary for successful careers, but that are not taught in typical graduate courses. We found that an overnight retreat is an effective format for this type of group training; it allows plenty of time for learning, socializing, and processing together. With faculty absent, students feel freer to take chances, speaking about topics outside of their specialties. By holding the retreat early in the academic year, students benefit from familiarity with and confidence in each other throughout their courses and also following semesters. Encouraging camaraderie among graduate students fosters the collaborative, interdisciplinary thinking that will serve students, as well as the marine research and policy communities, in the future.

The Darling Marine Center is an excellent site for our student retreats. It is somewhat isolated, surrounded by natural beauty, and has inspired students of the marine environment for 50 years. The

Darling Marine Center generously donates the meeting and dorm space for our retreats; the remaining support comes from UMaine Graduate Student Government grants and departmental funds. During the two MSPDC retreats we have held to date, each with about 20 graduate student attendees, we have found that students enjoy a mix of participatory activities, presentations by outside experts and faculty, and discussions. The first retreat focused on potential career paths after graduation and the skills needed to land a job. There are a lot of options for life after graduate school. Even within academia, there are choices to be made: for example, at what size institution do you want to work, and will you focus more on teaching or more on research? There are also skills that are best developed before you find yourself applying for that “dream job,” such as interviewing, communicating your work effectively, or negotiating salary.

At the first retreat, students learned about each other’s previous work experience (everything from goat farmer to bat habitat specialist), and the paths we took to become graduate students at UMaine. This activity helped students become acquainted, while learning that there are many paths to the same place. We also had a mini-workshop about salary negotiation and interview skills. The most positively received part of this first retreat was a panel discussion about different career paths. The panelists included undergraduate- and graduate-level professors, an aquaculture industry member, a marine science public educator, a scientist from a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) focused on fishing community issues, a National Science Foundation program manager, a development and communications officer for a local NGO, and a scientist for the state fisheries agency. The primary messages that permeated all of these activities were: having a career plan is important, but so is being flexible; finding work-life balance is critical and means different things to different people; do work that you believe in so that you can convince others that it is important; and cultivate collaborations and relationships.

Following encouragement and constructive feedback from the first year’s attendees, we held a second retreat focused on communicating science to a diversity of audiences. We used a similar format to the first year and added more participatory activities. The ability to explain one’s research to the general public, community stakeholders, and scientists in other fields is invaluable to a successful career. Giving your research a voice in public discourse contributes to a science-literate and informed public, and enthusiastically communicating the importance of your research helps to secure funding. During the retreat, we focused on turning our research into compelling stories. We drew storyboards and presented them to the whole group. As simple as this activity sounds, many of us were challenged by simplifying a description of our research to create an intriguing story. As a group, we helped one another find interesting angles from which to present our work and learned to draw our audiences along a plot with the punch line “and this is why we must find out more about this!” One guest speaker, a marine science communication specialist, shared the national ocean literacy standards (<http://oceanliteracy.wp2.coexploration.org>), which delineate what to expect students of different ages to have learned in public school. She encouraged us to be aware that what an audience wants to learn is not always what we, as scientists, want to talk about. We must be tuned into not only our audience’s level of understanding, but also its areas of interest. A five-member panel discussed the nuances of establishing credibility while avoiding jargon and “speaking down” to people. The most resonant lesson of the day

was to connect personally with your audience.

Indeed, personal connection has been the consistent theme throughout the life of the MSPDC. For us, the opportunity to work with others makes science exciting, and developing strong and sincere relationships makes science enjoyable. The social aspect of coming together for a two-day retreat provides the setting in which to build connections with other graduate students. The retreats’ focus on professional development provides opportunities to discuss the challenges of graduate school, individual research struggles and successes, and concerns or ideas about professional plans. Such opportunities are otherwise limited in the graduate school experience. Building camaraderie among our graduate students sets up a positive feedback for everyone’s education and research progress. It is beneficial to learn from your peers, as well as build relationships that will later become professional collaborations. We hope that with the continued success of MSPDC events, SMS students will enhance their own graduate education with practical knowledge and skills for life after graduate school.

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ARTICLE CITATION

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