

University Research Magazine Association conference recap • August 2017

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Waiting to board the bus at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute.

This was my first URMA conference, and I appreciate how welcoming the group is to newcomers. Beginning with the first evening's impromptu dinner, I was struck by how generous the other conference participants were with their time and professional advice.

The pre-conference field trip to Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute did not disappoint. It was a gorgeous place to spend the day, and I could also see many parallels between this historic, complex lab and my own employer, SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory. During the lunchtime discussion, it was helpful to hear how others best gather information and prioritize stories when there are so many research groups within an

institution and possible angles. It's helpful to hear what others have tried and what has succeeded or failed. The Woods Hole science communicators discussed how to demonstrate your communications expertise to scientists and how to encourage researchers to share their own work and feel confident doing it. A couple ideas stood out to me—display your communications team's credentials on a brochure website to share with others in your organization and create a workshop for scientists to learn research communication, and produce a joint publication such as a magazine as the "final" for the course.

Providence is an exceptional place to think about the deep history of scientific discovery and the longstanding benefits of science. At the Ladd Observatory, I learned that cities once relied on astronomers to ensure that accurate timekeeping. The scientists would track the stars at Ladd as they passed through five slits. It was a simple but critical task for communities.

This same humbling thought about the history and importance of science resurfaced several times throughout the conference, in particular during the talk by Brown University biology professor Ken Miller. (He authored my high school biology textbook!) His review of science skepticism in America's history gave me a new perspective on the current political climate. As Miller said, often views towards science are "not a matter of facts, but a matter of identity." Our goal as science communicators should not simply be inundating others with facts, but helping others connect in a meaningful way with science.



Dusk at Brown University's Ladd Observatory, founded in 1891.



Filmmakers at the URMA Research Film answer questions from conference participants and Providence community members.

I also found all conversations about multimedia valuable, including the Facebook Live demo and tips from the Film Festival participants.

For me, the most memorable part of the conference was the tour of the Rhode Island School of Design's Nature Lab. The substantial collection of biological specimens inspired me, a clumsy, novice artist, to take time to explore visual details and draw insects as I viewed them under a microscope. In my work, I will continue to think more about how I can pair visuals with words in a meaningful way and pay attention to unusual sources of inspiration.

The book club proved to be a nice supplement to the conference sessions, and reminded me that I rarely take the opportunity to discuss literature with peers. *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi showed how powerful science can be when it's personal and an author is willing to share that connection with others.

By the end of the conference, I felt refreshed and reenergized to share the science of my lab. During the flight home, I couldn't quiet my mind until I had jotted down all the new possibilities I could see for my own work.

(And although this isn't exactly related to science communication, I'd like to point out that Rhode Island could be the best-kept travel secret in our country. I plan to return with my family for a WaterFire festival!)



At the Rhode Island School of Design, students and guests can make use of the specimens in the Nature Lab's collection. The animals and plants are preserved in clear containers that allow handling and examination.

Kudos to Noel Rubinton, Brown University and each of the conference organizers. Your thoughtfulness and attention to detail is inspiring. And thank you for the support through the Nick Houtman Travel Grant program.