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Enhancing departmental engagement

Using a LibGuide to promote an invited speaker seminar series

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The departmental seminar has long held a prominent place in the culture of academic science. In chemistry, one of the most tradition-bound STEM disciplines, faculty of all ranks go on the road with prepared talks about their latest research, visiting host departments to share and network. While this mode of communication is time-intensive and not inexpensive, it offers many benefits to all concerned.

For the invited speakers, the opportunity to spend a day meeting with peers, mentors, graduate students, and presenting one's research in a formal yet intimate setting is an excellent way to get direct feedback and learn what's happening in other departments and research labs outside of one's own institution.

This networking enhances their visibility among peers, and can help them in the quest for their next promotion or job. They can also meet potential future postdoctoral and faculty recruits, and discover potential collaborators.¹

The host departments, which generally pick up the tab for the speakers, likewise benefit in many ways. Students get a opportunity to learn about cutting-edge research from outside experts, and meet and mingle with "big names" in their field—not to mention making vital contacts for future career opportunities. They also can hone their own presentation skills by watching and interacting with more seasoned presenters. The department as a whole benefits from the occasion to gather together on a regular basis and overcome some of the natural isolation that comes with being in a narrowly focused research group. The seminar also gives a department a chance to "show off" for valued colleagues and potential hires.²

Some librarians have routinely used local seminars and colloquia as an opportunity for personal engagement and networking with faculty and students in the departments they serve. But for many of us, the time commitment of regularly attending seminars is prohibitive, and because the topics are often beyond the comprehension of a nonspecialist, sitting in on the actual presentations is not time well spent.

The Department of Chemistry at the University of Texas-Austin (UT) conducts a robust seminar program, and hosted around 60 such sessions in 2018, with most occurring during the spring and fall semesters. The seminars are organized in three ongoing divisional series: in Organic, Analytical and Physical (A&P), and Inorganic Chemistry. In addition, there are occasional special named lectures and department-wide colloquia, as well as faculty candidate talks. Each series has a faculty sponsor who identifies and recruits the speakers, and each speaker is assigned a faculty host who manages the visit. All events are listed in advance on the department's web calendar. The seminar series are primarily underwritten by dedicated endowment funds, which pay the costs of travel, catering, and (in some cases) honoraria. Seminars are held in the afternoons in one of two auditoriums in the Chemistry buildings, and generally attract a crowd of 40-to-100 attendees, depending on the speaker and topic.

In 2017 I proposed creating a site in Springshare's popular LibGuides platform that would complement the basic departmental calendar by providing biographical profiles and photos of each invited speaker, with links to their personal research web sites, publications lists, and author metrics. The resulting guide is titled Chemistry Guest Seminars.³

These profiles are grouped by sponsoring division and arranged in reverse chronological order using the Tabbed Box layout. (Seminars that fall outside the three regular divisional series, including faculty recruitment seminars, are assigned to the most appropriate topical group.)

The screenshot shows a LibGuide page for 'Chemistry Guest Seminars' with a search bar and navigation tabs. The 'A&P Seminars 2019' tab is active. Under 'Analytical & Physical Seminars', a grid lists speakers: Proff - 9/26, Zamine-Afsar - 9/19, Fayer - 9/5, Schlau-Cohen - 9/22, Cowers - 5/13, Pressé - 4/25, Skinner - 4/11, Y. Xiang - 4/10, Sheldon - 3/28, Bercovici - 3/14, Grumstrup - 2/28, Burgard - 2/21, Zare - 2/7, Lewis - 1/21, and L. Xiang - 1/16. The featured speaker, Gabriela Schlau-Cohen, is highlighted with a photo and a detailed bio. The bio describes her research in multidisciplinary fields like chemistry, optics, biology, and microscopy, focusing on protein dynamics and single-molecule studies. It also lists her publications and author metrics, such as an h-index of 16 and 1208 total citations from Web of Science.

Screenshot of the series LibGuide.

The seminar administrator then adds links to each event in the departmental calendar as well as in the announcement and reminder emails sent out to department members, providing ample opportunities for students and faculty to visit the guide.

Sources

The primary source material for building the speaker profiles is their personal research websites, which are now ubiquitous among academic principal investigators (PIs) in Chemistry and other STEM disciplines.

These sites include biographical profiles and photos of the PI and group members, descriptions of current research focus, and lists of publications. In the case of faculty candidate seminars, the speakers are often postdocs, so I use what information I can glean from their home group site and omit links to group publications (I prefer a personal profile on a site such as Google Scholar Citations).

I also include a link to an ORCID profile, if the speaker has one. Photos of the speakers are embedded via a link to the image on the source site. Speakers from industry pose a greater challenge, because they rarely have personal web pages apart from social media sites, such as LinkedIn and ResearchGate, and they tend to publish less frequently.

Author metrics

Apart from straightforward biographical and research background, the added value of this project from the library perspective lies in promoting the concepts of bibliometrics and reputational tools such as ORCID. Each profile includes the speaker's current h-index, total numbers of articles and citations from either Web of Science or Google Scholar Citations, or both. (UT does not subscribe to Scopus.) In some cases metrics are not obtainable due to name ambiguity

Uptake and usage

Between its launch in July 2017 and May 2019, the Seminars guide attracted a total of 7,757 page views, according to the statistics module in LibGuides. The five months with the highest total views (November 2017, with 589; February and April 2018, with 892 and 546 respectively; February and April 2019, with 753 and 540 respectively) were anomalous, possibly due to one or more particularly prominent visiting speakers during those months. The monthly median rate for the entire study period was 362 hits. During the spring semester of 2019, the Seminars guide itself ranked 31st in total views, out of more than 600 published guides in UT's LibGuides instance.

Subject Area	Number of Seminars	Total Page Views
Organic	56	3650
Analytical & Physical	47	2517
Inorganic	22	1590
<i>Total</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>7757</i>

Figure 1. Page Views by Month and Subject Area. The table shows the number of seminars and page views by topical series during the period in question. The Organic series had the most events and attracted by far the most views.

Time investment

With practice and repetition, along with much copying and pasting, a typical profile tab takes about 10-to-20 minutes to create, edit, and finish. Some speakers take more time, especially those from industry or foreign countries where biographical information may be harder to find. With roughly 60 profiles to create during a calendar year, the amount of time required to keep up with the flow of seminars is not trivial. While the LibGuides interface is not difficult to use, editing at this scale requires a substantial number of clicks and a familiarity with the platform's quirks, as well as a commitment to set aside time to update the site at least once or twice each month.

It's also essential to be in regular contact with the departmental staff member(s) who coordinates the seminars, to keep up with scheduling changes, cancellations, and profile links.

On balance, the time spent on this task has been worth the effort. It has helped to integrate the library and the librarian more regularly into the intellectual life of the Chemistry Department, and it has likely increased traffic to our other guide by enticing chemists to visit a site many of them may not have been aware of before.

This approach is even more vital now that UT's Chemistry branch library has closed due to building renovation, and the librarian is no longer located in the main chemistry building. The guide also provides a platform for the subtle marketing of scholarly communication topics and tools such as ORCID, author metrics, and databases.

Finding ways to leverage the tools and time we have is always a challenge, and in this pilot LibGuides has proved to be useful for something beyond the garden-variety information guide.

Notes

1. Audrey W. June, "The Hidden Power of the Invited Talk," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Hidden-Power-of-the/245713> (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Hidden-Power-of-the/245713>) (accessed May 29, 2019).

2. B. R. Singh and J. C. Deck, "Etiquette in Departmental Seminars," *Journal of Chemical Education*, 75 (1998): 846–48, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1021/ed075p846> (<https://dx.doi.org/10.1021/ed075p846>).
3. Chemistry Guest Seminars, <https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/chemistry/seminars> (<https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/chemistry/seminars>).