Meet the 2024-2025 Physical Sciences Science Communication Fellows

The fellows are learning to tell the stories of discovery happening at the UC Irvine School of Physical Sciences.

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This year's fellows, from left to right: Sukriti Kapur, UC Irvine Department of Chemistry; Jenny Tran, UC Irvine Department of Mathematics; Lurui Niu, UC Irvine Department of Earth System Science; Olti Myrtaj, UC Irvine Department of Physics & Astronomy.

Picture Credit:

UC Irvine

Telling the story of science – how it happens, how it reveals the inner workings of our universe, how it succeeds and also how it stumbles – is a tough skillset to master. That's why each year the UC Irvine School of Physical Sciences trains four graduate student fellows from each of its four departments in the craft of science communication. The fellowship involves intensive training in science writing so the fellows can master the nuts and bolts of what makes for accurate and compelling stories. It's a year-long experience that sees each fellow develop their own voice as a science storyteller, so be on the look-out for the following names in the communications channels of the UC Irvine School of Physical Sciences:

Olti Myrtaj, UC Irvine Department of Physics & Astronomy

Olti Myrtaj was just a kid living in Virginia when he looked up at the night sky and felt a strong sense of awe and wonder. Myrtaj had an innate understanding even then that what lay before him – the stars and galaxies and all the mysteries they hold – was one of the best stories ever told. Now, as a Ph.D. student in the UC Irvine Department of Physics & Astronomy, Myrtaj is working to help tell that story both in his research and as one of the School of Physical Sciences' science communication fellows. "My research focuses on understanding how our Milky Way galaxy arrived at its present-day shape, especially how it formed its disk structure," said Myrtaj, who's a student in the group of James Bullock, dean of the School of Physical Sciences and a professor of physics and astronomy. "The Milky Way and many other galaxies spin in a flattened, disk-like shape similar to a frisbee. Billions of years ago, the early universe was a chaotic environment, and how a coherent disk structure grew out of our Galaxy's turbulent youth is a puzzle." Myrtaj is working to crack that puzzle while simultaneously learning how to write and tell stories about the research and other happenings in his department. Myrtaj knows that the right story told in the right way can change the way someone understands the natural world; once, in a discussion section he led, Myrtaj used billiards to explain certain quantum phenomena, and he saw lightbulbs go off in his students' eyes. As a fellow, Myrtaj plans to continue igniting lights through the stories he tells, with a focus on scientists themselves. "I believe that sharing the human side of science, showing how personal backgrounds and personalities shape researchers, can inspire a broader audience to appreciate and connect with their work," he said.

Sukriti Kapur, UC Irvine Department of Chemistry

Sukriti Kapur grew up in New Delhi, India and moved to the U.S. so she could get her Ph.D. studying air pollution and health effects in the lab of Professor Manabu Shiraiwa in the UC Irvine Department of Chemistry. Growing up in New Delhi, which regularly sees severe episodes of pollution, Kapur regularly witnessed the impact poor air quality can have on the health of those around her. “Growing up, seeing my city become progressively polluted over the years, I pivoted my career goals to align with my passion for making a difference,” said Kapur, who when she was younger would try explaining scientific concepts to her parents to see how well she could get complex ideas across to them. “While gaining formal knowledge on the subject, I was always surprised by the lack of available resources to effectively break down research to a broad audience, and how there was a clear communication gap between researchers and non-researchers.” Driven to research air pollution solutions and to ensure as many people as possible can understand those solutions, Kapur, now a Physical Sciences sci-comm fellow, is aiming to interact with as many scientists in her department so she can sharpen her ability to distill esoteric topics for general audiences. Kapur believes in the power of telling stories about the people behind the research she’s reporting on, and has plans to conduct interviews with researchers to share their challenges and triumphs.

Lurui Niu, UC Irvine Department of Earth System Science

Earth is a complex system comprised of a staggering number of interacting parts, and telling the story of the planet is an equally complex challenge. But it’s exactly that challenge that inspired Lurui Niu, a second-year Ph.D. student in the UC Irvine Department of Earth System Science, to hone her storytelling skills as her department’s science communication fellow. “I became interested in science communication when I realized how challenging it can be to convey scientific stories clearly to the public,” said Niu, who’s studying sustainable aviation fuel and how it stands to improve air quality and help mitigate the impacts of human-driven climate change. “I became interested in science communication when I realized how challenging it can be to convey scientific stories clearly. Science needs communication, and sometimes it needs to be explained in a simpler language in order to make it accessible and engaging.” Niu knows that her particular field is just one piece of the whole Earth system, and that to tell the story of one part of the system is to tell a piece of the entire Earth story. “I want to learn more about writing style and how to communicate scientific ideas on social media effectively, to communicate how Earth system science is a web of interconnected fields,” Niu said.

Jenny Tran, UC Irvine Department of Mathematics

Jenny Tran is a Ph.D. student in the UC Irvine Department of Mathematics where she's currently studying applied and computational mathematics alongside Professor Anna Ma. Tran became interested in science communication when she took an upper-division course on math writing with Professor Bob Pelayo. "I think from taking this course, we all realized how hard it was to communicate what math is, and it was just fun trying to figure that out and write a research paper," said Tran, who finds storytelling inspiration in the work of online creators who reveal the hidden-but-wondrous sides of natural phenomena like lakes. One lake in particular – Lake Baikal in Siberia – caught Tran's imagination because of the odd life forms it supports as one of the oldest lakes on Earth. Tran hopes to capture imaginations in a similar way as a sci-comm fellow. "I hope to learn how to communicate and tell better stories through my writing in a more effective way," Tran said. "I'm interested in writing feature stories and highlighting the successes made throughout the department, and I'd like to try writing about upcoming research in the department and try to understand it and communicate because, as everyone knows, math can get complicated."

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