Stephen Hsu is vice president for research and graduate studies at Michigan State. "We need everyone to understand why what we do is important," he says in a video shown at a faculty workshop on publicizing research.

Legislators and the public are often skeptical that higher-education tax dollars are being put to good use. Colleges see it as more important than ever, then, for academics to be able to explain their research in lively, accessible ways. At Michigan State University, a group of faculty members recently gathered to learn how.
The leaders of a three-hour workshop outlined a number of ways to communicate beyond academic peers. Among them: 30-second elevator speeches, jargon-free writing, linking your work to real-world problems, and cultivating a certain level of media savvy.

Equally important is a sense of urgency. "We need everyone to understand," says Stephen Hsu in a video that kicks off the training, "why what we do is important."

How to Explain Your Research

Michigan State and other colleges teach faculty members how to explain why their work matters. That's key to getting lawmakers and a skeptical public to appreciate universities' contributions.

- Communication 101 for Professors Premium
- Is Professorial Branding for You? Yes, It Is

Michigan State, where Mr. Hsu is vice president for research and graduate studies, hopes that encouraging researchers to spread the word about their work will pay off. When faculty members position themselves as experts in topics that are hard to understand or at the center of heated public debate, it can enhance their stature as well as the university’s. And scholars who can talk clearly to policy makers and others about their work and why it matters can help maintain public support for research funding. That’s crucial at a time when some lawmakers and public officials use a narrow set of metrics to measure an institution’s effectiveness.

Easier said than done, though. Many academics have spent their careers in the singular pursuit of an idea or topic that they’ve typically written about at length for clusters of like-minded peers in their field. They see communicating to a broad audience as rife with pitfalls. Some of those are real: It can be tricky to simplify complicated subject matter. Some are assumed, and damaging to academe: Talking to the public is a waste of time.

"None of us were trained to talk about our work this way," says June Pierce Youatt, Michigan State’s provost.
The university is trying to change that through a series of voluntary workshops to help professors craft or sharpen their messages. After a senior public-relations manager attracted media attention to the work of some top researchers, the university decided to build on that momentum by teaching academics to talk to the public and the media about their work. Since January, more than 175 people have participated in sessions that cover topics like creating an online presence and doing media interviews.

"We know that not everybody’s going to be good at it," says Mr. Hsu, a physicist. "But we have over 2,000 tenure-stream faculty. If we can find the 10 percent who would love doing it, that’s 200 ambassadors. We want all of our faculty to have this opportunity if they want it."

6 Tips to Better Connect

This advice is from a Michigan State University faculty workshop on communicating with a broad public.

- **Write in the active voice** and use short paragraphs.
- **Read the publications** or websites you want to write for to get familiar with their style.
- If possible, **link your research to a problem** or issue that many people can relate to.
- **Think about why you’re passionate** about your research and incorporate that into a 30-second elevator speech about what you do.
- **Don’t use jargon**; it only clouds your message.
- **Research that’s timely**, new, or has clear impact is more likely to catch the news media’s attention.

Sudin Bhattacharya, an assistant professor of biomedical engineering, pharmacology, and toxicology, attended last month’s workshop at Michigan State. His interest in promoting science literacy worldwide helped pique his interest in the introductory session.

"Humans are innately curious creatures, and sometimes they just want to understand something," says Mr. Bhattacharya, who uses computational and mathematical modeling to study how toxic chemicals affect cells. "I think a generally informed citizenry is better for democracy."

He has written about his area of interest for fellow academics, but "I definitely want to reach a broader audience," he says.

Part of the workshop focused on how to pitch an article to an editor of The Conversation, an online site that partners with universities to offer explanatory and commentary pieces by academics for mainstream audiences. Mr. Bhattacharya paired up with another attendee for the exercise, with instructions from the workshop’s leaders to "be critical but positive" when giving feedback.

He pitched an article about whether avalanches and mass extinctions can help explain human disease. His partner, Joanne Crawford, wanted to write about the restoration of wild-turkey populations and their habitat, which has benefited other species.
Publishing an article on The Conversation could do more than just publicize his research, Mr. Bhattacharya says. He sees it as "a component" of his portfolio that might pave the way toward a collaborative project with other researchers.

Reaching a broader audience requires distilling one’s work into a concise statement. But that runs counter to a culture in which multipage CVs serve as calling cards. In fact, when a few workshop participants tried to present a truncated version of what they do, most ran past the 30-second mark. One kept talking for nearly a minute after a gong sounded and then finally gave up, his voice trailing off.

Denise Ferrell, an assistant professor of nursing, has talked to nonacademic audiences about her research on the dearth of minority students in nursing programs, but the workshop reminded her to keep refining her message. "I’m still polishing up my elevator speech," she says. "To narrow down all the information you know about something is challenging. I want to be the best I can at trying to get the word out." The racial gap is troubling in itself, she says. And minority students who are enrolled aren’t adequately supported or mentored, so they sometimes drop out. Having a medical staff that mirrors the demographics of a patient population helps health workers better connect with their clients.

"You have to relate to people on their level. My goal is to never make anybody feel stupid.” Sometimes researchers eager to discuss their work face resistance from the public. Ms. Crawford, a Michigan State research associate, remembers driving a university truck as a graduate student doing field research on swamp-rabbit ecology at Southern Illinois University. Passers-by, often hunters or related to one, would ask her: "What are you wasting taxpayer dollars on?"

As a wildlife biologist, she sees that kind of interaction as a wonderful opportunity.

"It allows me to say we’re trying to preserve this population so it can be hunted for generations to come," says Ms. Crawford, whose current research involves the restoration of wild turkeys. She has experience in talking about her work to children, but she attended the workshop to learn more about how to explain it to adults.

"I definitely appreciated the ideas about crafting your message and finding common ground," she says. "You have to relate to people on their level. My goal is to never make anybody feel stupid."

Finding the right balance is hard, says Arend Hintze, an assistant professor of integrative biology and of computer science and engineering. He studies the evolution of natural and artificial intelligence, and is careful to simplify his work so that it is "communicated appropriately and scientifically accurate."

"I’m doing a service for the public," Mr. Hintze says, "I have a duty to communicate that." Mr. Hintze blogs about his research and has written nonacademic articles on topics including how artificial intelligence can help make computer games more interesting and his fears about AI.
Artemis Spyrou, an associate professor of physics at Michigan State: "I think it’s important that scientists talk about their research and their discoveries because if they don’t, someone else will, and they might not provide accurate information."

Professors will find their most comfortable styles and venues, says Ms. Youatt, the provost. "Some people will be called by NPR, and someone will speak at the Kiwanis Club."

Artemis Spyrou, an experimental nuclear physicist who participated in one of the workshops, has spread the word to youth audiences about her research on the reactions that occur inside stars. But even with that practice, she knows that her field is tough to understand. An associate professor of physics, she is familiar with two reactions: "When you say you’re a nuclear physicist, I get nothing — just a blank stare. On the other end of the spectrum, I hear, ‘Are you making bombs?’ And that is not at all what we’re doing."

She’s willing to take the extra step to explain. "I think it’s important that scientists talk about their research and their discoveries because if they don’t, someone else will," Ms. Spyrou says, "and they might not provide accurate information."

That kind of communication also reminds parents of students that their children are working with a highly talented group of thinkers.
"The citizenry has forgotten the value of the university in their community," Ms. Youatt says. "When I talk to parents, I try to help them see that they’re studying with the people who are creating the knowledge, not just disseminating it."

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