GRaSP Poster Session

In this short document, we provide a broad overview of the point and the mechanics of poster sessions. More detailed instructions will follow in additional documents and at the training session.

Overview. Poster sessions are a common way academics gather to talk about their work. Sessions typically take place in a large room, and posters are hung along the walls or placed on easels. These posters contain images that illustrate the presenter’s academic work, and some text that provides the main points the presenter wants to make. The researcher stands next to the poster and uses it as a visual aid while they describe their work to interested participants at the session. Audience members mill about, listening to the presenters—often while snacking on food or enjoying an adult beverage. They will approach an interesting poster alone, sometimes aggregating into small groups, while the presenter discusses their work. Using the poster as prop, the presenter typically relays their content by working through a loosely rehearsed script in less than two minutes. This presentation is often broken up by questions from those that have gathered, and followed by a dialogue with the group. Audience members may drift in and out of the gathering, and a presenter can expect to work through their poster in this way maybe a dozen times during a two hour session. Poster sessions themselves should be informal and fun for the presenters and audience members.

Goals. Your goals will be determined, in large part, by who will comprise audience and what you want out of the poster session. There are many reasons you might want to participate. Sessions can provide opportunities to network within your professional community or increase the profile of you and that of your work. In addition, feedback from audience members can improve your work, there are often prizes for the best poster presentation, etc. Knowing your audience and what you want from a poster session will help you determine what to include on the poster itself.

Content. Your goals for participating in a session will influence the content of your poster, and how you present it. However, some things will always be true. First, you should strive for a simple and direct description of a single idea. This means you should not aim to convey your entire thesis, but rather a single, focused portion of it. Often, the hardest parts of talking about one’s graduate work are (i) putting the work in its larger context, particularly when talking with non-specialists, (ii) explaining the work meaningfully without getting into too much detail, and (iii) knowing what to leave out. Since the GRaSP session is about highlighting your work to an educated, general audience, your content will differ considerably as compared to what you would present if you were talking only with members of your Department. In considering what to present, you should think about your audience and what they might find the most interesting. You should also think about what you can relay effectively in a two-minute conversation with the help of a visual aid.

One way to approach developing your presentation is to build a narrative around your work. The story of how you became interested in this subject, the historical context of your subject that sets the stage for a long-unanswered question, etc., can work well. Another approach is to use a very general, perhaps even seemingly unrelated example to draw in non-specialists and connect them to your work.

Presentation. Once you have identified the core idea and approach you will use to convey it, you can develop the poster itself. A poster is really a prop - something to use to convey your content while speaking. It should be visually compelling and can help draw in audience members, it can add clarity when describing complex ideas or protocols, or illustrate data using clear and intuitive figures. But most of all, it should help you talk through your project in an engaging way in about two minutes. The best way to ensure it is useful is to practice talking over it to learned friends; this will reveal quickly how well your figures and layout works. On average, the less text on the poster, the better your presentation will be.