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- EDUCATION
- PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- NON-PROFIT

“The pandemic highlighted what makes active community management and support so crucial, but I don’t think good science ever happens without community.”

COULD YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO OUR READERS? TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND THE COMMUNITY YOU MANAGE.

I am the Director of Career and Professional Development at the [Science Communication Lab](#) (SCL). The SCL is an innovative non-profit organization dedicated to using multimedia storytelling to engage the public, including educational and scientific communities, in the journey and wonder of science. At the SCL I wear many hats, from curriculum designer to community manager, all primarily focused on our online education platform, [iBiology Courses](#).

iBiology Courses provide professional development opportunities for scientists at the senior undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral levels. I manage the courses’ learner community. The community has membership from around the world, with a little more than half of the members hailing from the US. We have almost 3,000 people registered on our new platform (released February 2021), and we have been building and releasing courses for over 6 years now. The community primarily interacts on discussion boards, with some social media and newsletter communication from us.

WHAT WAS YOUR PATH TO SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT? WERE YOU TRAINED AS A SCIENTIST OR DID YOU COME BY ANOTHER ROUTE?

I got my doctorate in biophysics at the University of California, San Francisco and did my undergraduate degree in chemistry and computer science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Supporting the research community has always been an important part of my work. For example, my graduate and postdoctoral research focused on identifying ways in which algorithms for predicting protein function have created inaccurate data in public databases, potentially impacting experiments around the world. After my training, I transitioned to a career in professional development, during which I mentored and facilitated cohorts of biomedical graduate students as they went on internships and explored their career paths. From this position, I came to the SCL (then called iBiology) and helped build the online course project and manage the community of learners.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE KEY RESPONSIBILITIES OF YOUR ROLE? HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY SPEND YOUR TIME?

I definitely am a jack of all trades. My community management work focuses mainly on resolving user support issues, developing new features for the platform, and developing longer-term initiatives to support and build the community either through new technology or new staff activities.

In addition to community management, I also develop online courses, which involves everything from writing grants to producing course videos to writing course text and assessments.

LOOKING BACK ON THE LAST YEAR, WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR FAVORITE PROJECT YOU’VE WORKED ON?

There have been a lot of fun projects, so I will choose the one that is hopefully coming out soon. We are adding digital badges to our course platform. Each time a learner passes a course, they’ll attain a badge, which they can share on social media. We are hoping that the badges will not only encourage people to pass each course, but also that this will encourage a sense of community outside of the courses platform and entice some new people to take the courses and join the community. We plan to release the new badge functionality in a couple of months (exact date TBD).



KEY

- INTERPERSONAL
- PROGRAM MANAGEMENT
- PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT
- COMMUNICATION
- TECHNICAL



ALEXANDRA'S SKILLS WHEEL SIGNATURE

The CSCCE skills wheel is composed of five core competencies, with nine skills within each competency. Skills wheels are a common way of visualizing and curating information about skills that also allow for the creation of a job "signature" or "fingerprint" based on the particular skills in use. This wheel is representative of the skills Alexandra used over the last 12 months.

► For more information, see [the CSCCE skills wheel](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6391130).

DO YOU SHARE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT DUTIES WITH ANYONE ELSE? WHERE DOES YOUR POSITION FIT WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

We are a fairly small group of people (fewer than 20 people at the organization in total), so I am the primary manager of the community. I get intellectual, brainstorming, and problem detangling support from my course curriculum team member, and also our course platform technical lead. Our technical lead, an amazing external technical consultant, also does all the hard work of maintaining and developing the course platform technology. I also have support from another member of the organization about marketing. All of my coworkers are incredibly helpful in working through new initiatives and giving advice on how to address issues that might come up in the community.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT BEING A COMMUNITY MANAGER?

Working with and for my community is incredibly meaningful. I'm drawn to solving problems that I saw or experienced when I was in scientific training. In fact, the internship program I co-founded in my first post-training position, and the courses I developed here at the SCL, have all been things that would have really helped me when I was in training. Being able to support this community, either through course creation or direct management, feels very worthwhile.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE YOU HAVE FACED AS A SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY MANAGER? ARE THERE WAYS IN WHICH YOUR ROLE COULD BE MADE EASIER – SUCH AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES OR SOMETHING ELSE?

I would say the biggest challenge that I face is that community management is just part of my overall role. The way that I am funded, and, in fact, the way that I think many things are funded, means that the major portion of my work is not community management. What seems to be exciting to funders are things that are new: new projects, new ideas, new courses... but the critical work of dedicated community support tends not to be as interesting to them. I'm incredibly grateful for the funding we have that allows me to do my work, but I do wish that there were more opportunities that focus on supporting the fundamentals (community management, technology support and development, marketing etc.) that keep communities existing, thriving, and growing.

AND ZOOMING OUT A LITTLE, WHY DO YOU THINK COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT TO SCIENCE? HOW HAVE YOU SEEN ACTIVE MANAGEMENT IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNITY?

Community has always been important, I believe, but our recent experience with the pandemic has really highlighted for me the power and critical nature of community. People connected through Twitter, bioRxiv, online conferences, scientific organizations, and other modes to form new collaborations, share ideas and data, and help each other evaluate results. Could this have happened without community? This global catastrophe highlighted what makes active community management and support so crucial, but I don't think good science ever happens without community.

Last updated April 2022



This case study is part of a series created by the Center for Scientific Collaboration and Community Engagement.

Cite this case study as: Center for Scientific Collaboration and Community Engagement (2022) CSCCE Community Manager Case Study: Alexandra Schnoes. Schnoes, Pratt, Sidik, and Woodley doi: [10.5281/zenodo.6391130](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6391130)