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## Actor Is Honored for Using Improv to Help Scientists Communicate



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Alan Alda shows medical and nursing students at Stony Brook how to use acting techniques to explain science to a general audience.

By Paul Basken

Alan Alda came to the State University of New York at Stony Brook one summer night in 2006 to help celebrate its annual film festival and to talk about *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed*, his just-published memoir.

The actor managed to accomplish another task that evening: raising the likelihood that scientists will be able to convey their knowledge to the many people who need to understand it.

In New York City this week, Mr. Alda is being honored at the university's celebrity fund-raising gala for his central role in creating Stony Brook's Center for Communicating Science. Its program, based on improvisational theater techniques,

has trained people at about 60 universities across the country, and some of those people are using the techniques to train others at their own institutions. The idea "just caught fire," Mr. Alda says.

Best known as the star of the M\*A\*S\*H television series, Mr. Alda later was host of a science interview program on PBS for 13 years. Many of his guests, he observed, had trouble explaining their ideas to a general audience.

A solution, he thought, might be to teach scientists some basic improvisational skills. Though improv is commonly associated with comedy theater, it is, more fundamentally, the skill of listening to an audience and making corresponding adjustments in the delivery of a message.

During the film festival, Mr. Alda was seated next to Shirley Strum Kenny, then president of Stony Brook. As he had done at other universities across the country, he brought up his idea. Ms. Kenny, an English scholar, was immediately receptive. She says she had long wanted the institution to do more to prepare its students to explain scientific concepts to people who know less than they do, a skill they would surely need once they entered the work force.

Ms. Kenny arranged for Mr. Alda to meet with science faculty members to develop the concept. Howard S. Schneider, a former Newsday editor who had just founded Stony Brook's School of Journalism, pulled the project together. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory and Brookhaven National Laboratory joined as partners, and the effort won the support of a federal grant.

The resulting center now attracts about 60 students a semester who take classes in improv and in skills like writing and distilling complex messages. Mr. Alda helps with strategy and trains improv instructors. He also leads similar seminars on other campuses.

Marianne E. McNamara, a graduate student in marine science at Stony Brook, took Mr. Alda's first class at her university, in 2009. Before the class, when she told people

she studied jellyfish, they would mention their sting, and she would respond with a scientific "jumbling" of technicalities about her work with a specific type of zooplankton that does not sting. In Mr. Alda's class, she learned to find common ground with audiences by saying "yes" to the idea that jellyfish sting and then using a conversational style to explain in general terms what they really do. "The difference was just phenomenal," she says.

The way universities now teach scientists to communicate with the public, Mr. Alda says, is akin to preparing a novice pianist to play at Carnegie Hall by offering a bit of advice just days before the concert.

"You can't just expect people to communicate better by giving them a few tips or just telling them they have to get better at it," he says. "You really have to train them."

Update (5/1/2013, 2:30 p.m.): The State University of New York at Stony Brook announced at its fund-raising gala on April 24 that its Center for Communicating Science would be renamed the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science.