

[Newsday column; ran online with a video of Alan Alda at the Stars of Stony Brook Gala  
<http://www.newsday.com/long-island/suffolk/actor-alan-alda-honored-by-stony-brook-university-1.5135939>]

# Filler: Why Alan Alda wants you to find answers in science

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Photo credit: Agaton Strom | Actor Alan Alda with Ron Prosor, Richard Gelfond, Samuel J. Stanley, president of Stony Brook University and Carl Bernstein at Stony Brook University's annual gala at Pier Sixty in Manhattan. Alda was honored for creating the Center for Communicating Science. (April 24, 2013)

To the extent that the world improves, it will be science that makes it better. That's not to say spirituality, morality and religion can't help, but innovations in those spheres are unlikely, and would cause as much harm as good anyway.

When you pioneer a way of increasing crop yields and point out its superiority, people say, "You are awesome, oh bringer of large food surpluses," and, "Could you pass the bowl of suddenly abundant spuds?" When you invent a new perception of God or morality and point out its superiority, you tend to run into a "Die, verminous infidel" thing that isn't nearly as fruitful.

So we look to science, and looking to science has paid off. From food to medicine to agriculture to transportation to air-conditioning and heating to making my iPhone play "Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta" whenever I get a call, putting resources into science has rewarded us with a quality of life our ancestors couldn't imagine.

But science is soooo hard. We aren't easily drawn to concepts that are 273 times tougher than studying modern American childhood literature (a doctorate in Dr. Seuss?), so too often we don't major in them, or fund their research enough.

That's why [Stony Brook University's Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science](#), and the support it's getting from actor and science promoter [Alan Alda](#), are so important.

"It's not just the average well-educated person who doesn't get what scientists are doing," Alda said. "Scientists in different fields don't even understand each others' work."

If a biologist can't understand the allure and power of a physicist's research, neither will kids who, if they did get it, might begin a lifelong romance with science. Ditto philanthropists and politicians, whose support is crucial in the expensive world of research.

Alda, 77, is famous for his work on "M\*A\*S\*H," "West Wing" and in [the movies](#), but for more than a decade he also hosted the [PBS series "Scientific American Frontiers."](#)

"I was always interested in explanations of science, well communicated, that I could understand without learning a new language," Alda said.

In pursuing that interest, he's helped launch a couple of potentially potent programs.

The first is the Center for Communicating Science, founded with his help in 2009 and named for him last week at a gala that raised \$2 million for the center and another \$2 million for scholarships to [Stony Brook](#). The mission of the center is to make communication training a component of science education. Alda helped design the curriculum and train the instructors in skills like improvisation, in the hope they can help scientists pass passion along with the facts.

The other prong of Alda's effort is a contest, also with [Stony Brook](#), in which scientists must answer complex questions in a way an 11-year-old can understand. Last year's question: "What is a flame?" This year's: "What is time?"

The ever-increasing masses of people in this world must be fed, and provided with water and power. We must deal with the huge amounts of waste we create, and work to increase health and comfort globally. If we do so well enough, peace may come to our planet, and humanity may expand beyond it. If we don't, violence, want and war will be the certain result.

The answer is scientific advancement. What's needed is ample financial support for research, and a large supply of passionate, bright people hunting the answers. Neither will turn up if scientists come off like Beaker from "The Muppets" every time they try to explain their work.

Coming off like Hawkeye Pierce is much more likely to attract the dollars and devoted students the sciences need.

*Lane Filler is a member of the Newsday editorial board.*