Student Science Association Provides Community for Future Scientists

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Last Tuesday night, room L216 in Metropolitan State University’s New Main building became home to a meeting of the minds. From the hallway, occasional bursts of laughter could be heard, followed by excited chatter. A large banner just outside the door proclaimed that this was the weekly meeting of the Student Science Association (SSA), a student organization dedicated to enriching the science education of Metro students.

Visitors who entered the classroom were greeted with the sight of students discussing the events of the previous week and whether Batman could beat Superman in a fight. There was a table in the back with snacks, including chips, bottled water and test tubes full of Nerds candy. After a few minutes of chatting, Kelly Potz walked to the front of the room to begin the meeting. Potz is the president of the SSA, and has been ever since the organization was established in January. Or rather, it was reestablished in January, when Potz and other interested students rebuilt the organization, which had been dormant for a year. Since then, the group has met at 4:30 p.m. every Tuesday, even during the summer.

The meetings was run by Potz and Nina Suvorova, the Marketing and Events Coordinator of the club. Suvorova has been a member of the SSA since its rebirth in January. In that time, she and Potz have developed a unique presentation style that incorporates colorful Power Point slides, jokes and involvement from everyone in the room.

When questioned later about her presentation style, Suvorova said, “I have a lot of experience with clubs and I've learned that people always come back when they feel like they are part of a group. And that's something that I really try to establish. I try to make every member feel really important, give everybody a job, even if it's a small one, and just make sure that we continuously meet with each other on a weekly basis … I think that really helps strengthen the friendships that we build here.”

On the docket were such items as “Science in the News,” “In the Zone: A Discussion of Plate Tectonics,” “Interesting Journal Article of the Week,” “Snacks for the Meetings” and “What Are We Going to Do for Fall Fest?”

As it turns out, the team had already made plans for Fall Fest. They had enlisted several professors from the science department to sit in a dunk tank for an attraction that will, quite appropriately, be called “Dunk Your Science Professor.” From the back of the room, a student pointed out, “Yeah, if you fail that first quiz, you can get revenge.”

Another interesting agenda item was the “Test Prep Question of the Week.” As Potz noted, most students in the SSA are planning to go on to medical, pharmacy or grad school, so every week they ask a challenging question that might be found on the MCAT, PCAT, or GMAT admissions exams. For this meeting, the question was:

Which of the following is a monotremes?

a.) Donald the Duck

b.) Allie the Alligator

c.) Mickey the Mouse

d.) Paulie the Platypus

Apparently, monotremes are mammals that lay eggs, which means that “d” is the correct answer. Aside from having duck bills and webbed feet, platypuses also reproduce by laying eggs.

The meeting ended with a reminder that the group would be attending an event at the Science Museum later in the week.

Between the weekly meetings, members get the chance to participate in science-related events and volunteer opportunities. Earlier this year, students from SSA helped build the TapeScape exhibit at the Science Museum of Minnesota. The exhibit was made from a metal frame covered in packing tape to form elaborate tunnels for visitors to explore.

Members of SSA often volunteer with younger students. “Steve Campo [from Veterans Affairs] asked us to judge a middle school science fair near here,” said Potz. “So a few of us got to go be a part of that. We got to engage the middle schoolers and question their scientific methods, which was fun … and we'll have that opportunity again next year.”

Suvorova pointed out that volunteering is a great way to build a resume. “We have a whole binder full of volunteer opportunities,” she said. “If you're an environmental major or if you want to go to med school ... we can find resources and contact information so you can get involved in your discipline of choice … You can get connected with things like the Science Museum. Those are really helpful resources that can build your resume and your character. They make you stand out.”

Aside from volunteer opportunities, the SSA provides access to test prep supplies and networking events. **“**We have a lot of valuable resources to offer the students,” said Potz. “They join because they're like 'Oh, I don't have to spend $200 on a test-prep book, I can just borrow it.' And also, there is the fun, social aspect of it. We try to engage people socially, academically, and then with the volunteer stuff.”

Interested students can drop in on a meeting or e-mail the group at SSA.metrostate@gmail.com. The group also has OrgSync and Facebook pages with information on upcoming events, which are worth checking out. “This is a really great community,” said SSA member Scott Hanggi. “We can interact with fellow science students outside of our classroom. I feel like we can help each other a lot more by being in this club. It provides support and a greater sense of community.”

Photo caption: Farkash Elihad and Ryan Fitzgerald demonstrating a nucleation reaction at Student Science Association’s Mad Science event in June.

Photo credit: Nina Suvorova