Department of Plant, Soil, and Microbial Sciences
College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Scientific Communication and Professional Development (CSS 880)

Semester: Fall 2025
Credit hours: 2
Schedule: Wednesdays 10:20am-12:40pm
Location: A186 Plant and Soil Science BLDG

Instructor: Dr. Christine Sprunger
Office: W.K. Kellogg Biological Station, Stack 241
Office Hours: by appointment, in person or via zoom
Email: sprunge5@msu.edu

Course Description:

CSS 880 is designed to prepare students to become successful professionals. Content will focus on the skills and strategies for success in STEM careers in the private, public, and government settings. Course content will address three main topics:

1. Career management & leadership skills
2. Scientific communication to all audiences
3. Applying & interviewing for your next position

Weekly class meetings will include a combination of lecture, facilitated group dialogues based on assigned readings, and guest presentations. Job application materials and mock interviews will prepare students for career advancement.

Textbook & Course Materials:

- **REQUIRED:** All students must have a personal copy of StrengthsFinder 2.0 by Don Clifton (Simon and Schuster, 2007). Please purchase a NEW book, which includes the code for the online StrengthsFinder assessment. The code is not available with used books. The book can be purchased via Amazon and is ~$21. Another alternative is to purchase the online "**Top 5**" self-assessment separately, which will allow you to complete it immediately (although you'll end up paying both for the book and the assessment, or not have the other valuable information in the book for your professional library): https://store.gallup.com/p/en-us/10108/top-5-cliftonstrengths
- *Students who have taken the StrengthsFinder assessment in the past year should contact the instructor to discuss options.*
- **Other readings**: will be posted on (or linked from) D2L.

Course Requirements:

- Internet connection (DSL, LAN, or cable connection desirable)
- Access to *Desire2Learn (D2L)*

Course Structure:

This course will be delivered in-person. However, you will also need your MSU NetID to login to the course from the *D2L homepage* (*http://d2l.msu.edu*). In *D2L*, you will access lecture slides, course materials, and additional resources. Activities will consist of on-line assessments, readings, discussion forums, class discussions, group activity, and application material preparation.

Technical Assistance:

If you need technical assistance at any time during the course or to report a problem you can:

- Visit the MSU Libraries Discovery Services Site (https://lib.msu.edu/dls/)
- Visit the Desire2Learn Help Site (https://help.d2l.msu.edu/)
- Visit the MSU IT Help & Support Site (https://tech.msu.edu/support/help/), call (517) 432-6200 or toll free (844) 678-6200, or email ithelp@msu.edu

Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD)

To make an appointment with a specialist, contact (517) 353-9642 or TTY: (517) 355-1293

RCPD Get Started Info: https://www.rcpd.msu.edu/get-started

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

Objectives:

- Students will develop and explore their own leadership skills through strength assessments and group activities.
- Students will demonstrate competencies in science communication and exhibit effective strategies towards career preparation.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge in time management, career mapping, and professional development.

Learning outcomes:

By successfully completing this course, students should be able to

- Develop a comprehensive set of practical skills and tools related to time management and professional development
- Identify key leadership strengths and appropriate career pathways
- Effectively articulate their skills and experiences in application materials and in interview settings

Students will meet the objectives listed above through a combination of the following activities in this course:

- Attending and participating in each Wednesday class session
- Taking the StrengthsFinder assessment and writing a reflection paper
- Submitting discussion questions each week
- Completing an application packet and participating in a mock interview

Class Schedule

Date	***Topic***	***Facilitator***
Aug. 27	**Becoming an effective leader** ● Course overview & introductions ● Leadership wheel activity	Sprunger
Sept. 3	**Assessing your Strengths** • Readings: StrengthsFinder pages 1-31 *DUE Sunday Jan 12 before class:* Complete online StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment using code from the required text. *DUE: Position announcement for your dream position*	Sprunger
Sept. 10	**Preparing academic & professional application materials** • Readings: Kelsey et al., 2023 *DUE StrengthsFinder Reflection paper*	Sprunger
Sept. 17	**Publications and Peer Review** • Readings: Swayer et al., 2023 *DUE: CV or Resume and Cover Letter*	Sprunger
Sept. 24	**Strategies for achieving professional goals** • Readings: Effron et al., 2018; Acton et al., 2017 *DUE: Research Statement*	Sprunger
Oct. 1	**Preparing for careers in Industry** • Readings: Brown et al., 2019 *DUE: Teaching (or Extension or Leadership) statement*	Wade
Oct. 8	**How to write a DEI Statement?**	Sprunger
Oct. 15	**Scientific communication for careers in Extension** • Readings: Whitaker et al., 2022 *DUE: Diversity statement*	Jean
Oct. 22	**Conflict navigation** • Readings: Cunningham et al., 2019	Burton
Oct. 29	**Interviewing skills**	Sprunger

	• Readings: Kelsey et al., 2021	
Nov. 5	**Negotiating the position** • Readings: Bryant and Emers, 2016 *DUE: final mock application package*	Janzen
Nov. 12	**The academic hiring process**	Horgan
Nov. 19	**Work-life balance: how to have a life and be a professional** *Note: Peer applicant materials will be delivered to interview groups ahead of next week's mock interviews*	Sprunger
Nov. 26	***Workshop for Mock interview Prep*** *DUE: Submit questions for mock interviews*	Sprunger
Dec. 5	**Mock interviews during class time** *Prepare for being a peer interviewer (review applications in your group before class)*	Sprunger

Grading Policy

The table below describes the graded course activities including points and activity description. The first column includes the metric/activity, the second column includes the due date, and the third includes the points possible.

Grading and Expectations

Metric	Due Date	Points
StrengthFinder Reflection paper (1-page)	9/10/25	10
Curriculum Vitae and Cover Letter	9/17/25	20
Research Statement	9/24/25	10
Teaching, Extension, Or Leadership Statement	10/1/25	10
DEI Statement	10/15/25	10
Mock interviews	12/5/25	20
Participation (i.e. weekly discussion questions)	NA	20

StrengthsFinder Reflection paper: A one page reflection paper summarizing the results from the strength finder assessment is due in week 2. This paper will account for 10% of your grade.

Application Materials: In this course you will hone your application materials for your identified dream job. These materials will consist of a CV or resume, a cover letter, a Teaching, Extension *or* Leadership Statement, and a DEI statement. These application materials account for 40% of your grade.

Mock Interviews: On the final day of class, you will participate in mock interviews. You will administer interviews for your peers and partake in mock interviews as the applicant.

Participation: Contributions to class discussions and activities will account for 20% of the final grade. Submitting insightful weekly questions will count towards participation.

Complete Assignments

Assignments for this course will be submitted electronically through *D2L* unless otherwise instructed**.** Assignments must be submitted by the given deadline or special permission must be requested from instructor before the due date. Extensions will not be given beyond the next assignment except under extreme circumstances.

All discussion assignments must be completed by the assignment due date and time. Late or missing discussion assignments will affect the student's grade.

Late Work Policy

Assignments turned in after the designated due dates will result in 5% points deducted from that assignment for each day late.

Viewing Grades

Assignments will be graded within one week of the due date. Feedback on assignments and grades will be returned via D2L.

Final Grades will be assigned based on final scores as described in the table below

Grade Point	***Percentage***	***Performance***
4.0	≥90%	Excellent Work
3.5	85% to 89%	Above average
3.0	80% to 84%	Good Work
2.5	75% to 79%	Mostly Good Work
2.0	70% to 74%	Average work
1.5	65% to 69%	Below average work
1.0	60% to 64%	Poor work
0.0	≤59%	Failing work

Course Policies

Diversity Equity and Inclusiveness

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are important, interdependent components of everyday life in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR) and are critical to our pursuit of academic excellence. Our aim is to foster a culture where every member of CANR feels valued, supported and inspired to achieve individual and common goals with an uncommon will. This includes providing opportunity and access for all people across differences of race, age, color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, religion, national origin, migratory status, disability / abilities, political affiliation, veteran status and socioeconomic background. (See the full CANR statement: https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/canr-statement-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion)

Commit to Integrity: Academic Honesty

Article 2.3.3 of the Academic Freedom Report states that "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." In addition, the Department of Plant, Soil, and Microbial Sciences adheres to the policies on academic honesty as specified in General Student Regulations 1.0, Protection of Scholarship and Grades; the all-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades; and Ordinance 17.00, Examinations. (See Spartan Life: Student Handbook and Resource Guide and/or the MSU Web site: www.msu.edu.)

Therefore, unless authorized by your instructor, you are expected to complete all course assignments, including homework, lab work, quizzes, tests and exams, without assistance from any source. You are expected to develop original work for this course; therefore, you may not submit course work you completed for another course to satisfy the requirements for this course. Also, you are not authorized to use the www.allmsu.com Web site to complete any course work in this course. Students who violate MSU academic integrity rules may receive a penalty grade, including a failing grade on the assignment or in the course. Contact your instructor if you are unsure about the appropriateness of your course work. (See also the Academic Integrity webpage.)

Inform Your Instructor of Any Accommodations Needed

From the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD): Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at rcpd.msu.edu. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a Verified Individual Services Accommodation ("VISA") form. Please present this form to me at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (test, project, etc.). Requests received after this date may not be honored.

Participation and Engagement

During all classes, the instructor expects students to be fully engaged and prepared to discuss reading assignments. Students are encouraged to ask questions of the instructor, guest speakers, and their peers.

General College and University Policies

All other general college and university policies applicable to this course are available at https://www.canr.msu.edu/academics/courses/policies . Please review these policies. Topics covered in these general policies include:

- Students with disabilities, Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD) and accommodations
- Student rights under the family educational rights and privacy act (FERPA)
    - Student release authorization form
- Religious holiday policies
- Grief absence policies
- Students in distress policies
- MSU student athlete policies
- Course add-drop policies
- Honors options
- Course Management system policies
- Final exam policy and attendance
- Grade dispute policies
- Academic honesty and integrity, plagiarism, and disciplinary procedures
- Disruptive behavior
- Harassment and discrimination policies
- RVSM University reporting protocols
- Limits to confidentiality
- Social media policy
- Web accessibility policies
- MSU Code of Teaching Responsibility

- SIRS
- Commercialization of lecture notes
- University Learning Goals