

PERCS Within an Uncertain World

A new virtual, international seminar supporting Early Career Researchers in the Pal(a)eo Sciences

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With the onset of COVID-19, many departments have stopped hosting regular seminar series, and conferences and workshops have been postponed or adapted to become virtual. In addition to the loss of idea-sharing between institutions and networking opportunities, virtual spaces de-emphasise person to person interactions and discussions, both formal and informal. Furthermore, social distancing and isolation have stopped informal day-to-day interactions and stymied workplace camaraderie with colleagues. Science is a collaborative endeavour. What can we do to regain those interactions and fruitful discussions? How can we create an inclusive, supportive environment, lifting up early career researchers (ECRs), or those early on in their careers in non-academic workplaces, who do not have large networks of collaborators/colleagues? Those within academia additionally do not have the stability of tenured senior researchers. Those who are early career (new to a workplace, PhD students, postdocs, fellows) frequently describe isolation, worry about temporary contracts, and having limited support from administration or departments (Metcalf et al., 2020 [<https://www.ukri.org/files/legacy/documents/research-integrity-main-report/>]; Wellcome Trust, 2020 [<https://wellcome.ac.uk/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture/>]), accentuated if the individual is from an underrepresented background. These aspects of being early career in a workplace are going to be further amplified by the coming collapse of the (academic) job market during and post-COVID-19. With COVID-19 and all the issues faced by early career and/or diverse scientists, how does the community best support these folks in an uncertain world?

Enter Pal(a)eo PERCS: an international, grassroots initiative, created to continue the sharing of research, and striving to highlight the work of ECRs - those who will form the next generation of research leaders. Whilst PERCS (Pal(a)eo EaRly Career Seminar) was initially created to fill a vacancy, our hope is to use the strengths of the virtual space to benefit our community, by building a venue accessible across communities, far-flung locations, and career stages. As an entirely virtual seminar our costs are relatively low and we have been able to work with resources already available to build the framework. However, as the series grows we hope to secure funding to improve accessibility, and support the longevity of the initiative.

“Pal(a)leo” is a broadly defined field that can sit in many different departments, from geosciences to biology, chemistry, oceanography, and even anthropology, anything old and/or long dead. PERCS aims to broaden the academic and intellectual frameworks and networks of researchers interested in understanding the Earth’s past by bringing these varied subdisciplines together. PERCS provides a forum for “cross-pollination” for researchers from different “flavours” of the pal(a)eo-sciences, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Each PERCS session lasts ~90 minutes, comprising a 30 minute seminar, 15 minutes Q&A, 15 minute break-out sessions for facilitating small group interactions, and a 25-30 minute virtual “tea-time” organized around an informal topic (e.g., “What paleontological organism would you least like to be?”). The break-out sessions and tea-time are unique features, which have been

