

# GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR SETTING UP A REGULAR SKEPTICAL LECTURE SERIES

(Not for Public Distribution)

Setting up a regular pseudoscience lecture series on your local college campus may be the best way for a local skeptical group to regularly reach the public and to gain new members. In addition, a regular lecture series will offer members of your skeptical group a regular opportunity to socially gather and to learn in depth about topics that would be of interest to them as well as the general public. Besides, people who are paying to join a group feel that they are receiving a lot more for their money if that group can provide the speakers they have up to now only been reading about. A regular lecture series is also a profitable venture for a group through the selling of: books from Prometheus Press (they may be obtained on a consignment basis from Prometheus), *Skeptical Inquirers*, video tapes, bumper stickers, t-shirts, etc. In addition, you may charge a small fee for each lecture (with a discount or free admittance for your members) or pass a donation basket around just before the question and answer period.

There are a few preliminary steps that have to be followed that do not take a great deal of time with some good volunteer work.

Find the largest and most respected campus in your area. Inquire about setting up a public lecture series on campus and what you need to do. The following are the usual steps campuses need a group to go through to set up a lecture series.

**BECOME AN OFFICIAL CAMPUS ORGANIZATION:** First you need to be associated in an official way with the campus either by being an officially registered campus organization or by being sponsored by a department(s) or student campus organization. This is necessary in order to obtain free lecture halls. For instance, at the California Institute of Technology, the Southern California Skeptics (SCS) is sponsored by the Cal Tech Y; at Cal State, Fullerton SCS is sponsored by both the Physics Department and the campus student organization, and at UCLA SCS is sponsored by the UCLA division of the Southern California Skeptics.

**GET FACULTY OR DEPARTMENTAL SPONSORSHIP:** Most likely you will have members of your group or subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer* who are on the faculty of that campus. If you cannot locate sympathetic faculty members by this means then make some by approaching professors or the heads of any of the science departments (The Physics and Psychology Departments are usually good bets.) In most cases you will only need two members of the faculty to help sponsor a

series as well as sign papers to allow your group on campus as an official campus organization. Talk to them and tell them what your objectives are. Show the different lecture series brochures held at prestigious campuses in California. Inform them how popular and beneficial the series is among both students and faculty members as well as the general public. As a matter of fact, many teachers even sent their students to attend the lectures for extra credit! This is because the lecture series stimulates positive and useful thinking skills as well as a better understanding of the scientific method through the examination of various spurious claims. If set in this positive tone you will receive a much more receptive audience than if you stated that you just wanted to set up a lecture series to debunk silly notions. *The lecture series must have a positive and constructive bent to it. This is very important.*

Once the faculty members have agreed to help see if it is possible for them to get their respective departments to co-sponsor your lecture series. This adds to the credibility of your series and you will then most likely obtain free help from their departmental staff in the xeroxing of flyers and other such work.

**LOCATE A REGULARLY SCHEDULED LARGE LECTURE HALL:** The next step is to locate a lecture hall on campus. In most cases you will need to be an official organization on campus. That is why you needed to enlist the help of faculty members to support you and sign papers for you. Try to obtain a hall that at a minimum will fit 250 people. In addition, book the same hall for the whole year on a regular time slot. Try to make as few exceptions as possible. This is important because you need people to get where they can count on a lecture being held, for instance, on the second Sunday of every month at 2:00 p.m. If the hall and time is moved around a lot your regular people will get confused and not bother to return.

**TIMING:** Make every effort to offer your series at an advantageous time. Tuesday through Thursday nights at 7:30 p.m.; Saturday at 10:30 a.m. and Sundays at 2:00 p.m. are successful times.

**SCHEDULE AN EXCITING SERIES:** CSICOP now has on file a large list of "available" speakers (phone numbers and addresses can be provided) and topics with appropriate artwork and topic descriptions. The artwork and descriptions are public domain for skeptical groups and may be used freely without attribution. Set up a series that sounds exciting with diverse topics that would be of interest to the general public. For instance, one month on famous monsters, another month on the Bermuda Triangle, another on Firewalking, ESP Research, UFOs, etc. Do not worry that you may know that the Bermuda Triangle Mystery has been solved for years. Appreciate the fact that the general public still does not



know. As a matter of fact, this year our lecture on the Bermuda Triangle at UCLA and Cal State, Fullerton was jammed packed. Do not be repetitious. For instance, do not schedule two magicians the same year. You can make the point with one. Obviously, do not do lectures that are either esoteric or with a limited appeal such as the one group that sponsored a lecture entitled "Distinguishing Science from Pseudoscience in an Age of Logical Positivism." ZZZZZzzzzz. Keep the general public and students in mind!

**OBTAINING SPEAKERS:** Get in touch with the appropriate speakers available from the list provided by CSICOP. These speakers will be familiar with CSICOP and local skeptical groups and for the most part will be willing to give talks if their schedule will permit. At the very least you can obtain them for travel expenses and you will have to find them a place to stay. SCS has always managed to find them a comfortable home to stay at to avoid the cost of a hotel. Honorariums have to be worked out individually with each speaker. You will be surprised to find how many speakers will do your lecture for travel expenses alone or a small honorarium of 100 to 200 dollars. Also, there may be local talent that you can draw from. However, make sure that your speaker is a good lecturer! Boring lecturers can kill the most interesting of topics. And sometimes the "leading authority" can be the dullest lecturer. If your lecturers give excellent and entertaining presentations then your audience will return. Bad lecturers and topics can stop the momentum of a rapidly burgeoning and enthusiastic crowd. SCS has even recruited excellent lecturers to learn specially selected topics to present at our series because the "expert" was very poor in his or her delivery. If you consistently present good lectures your crowds will rapidly grow by word of mouth. In addition, if a speaker cannot make it on any of the dates that you have set for your lecture hall see if he or she will be in your area in the future. You might want to schedule a banquet around a dinner talk when they are in the area. Good way to raise money! This is especially true with "big name" speakers like Randi.

**PRESS CONTACTS:** Have a reliable volunteer work on obtaining all the radio, press, and television addresses and phone numbers in a fifty mile radius. Especially obtain the addresses and contacts of "free" or "throw-away" newspapers. This will be very important and necessary for your group to achieve constant publicity and thus attract new members. Most importantly obtain contacts at the campus newspaper so that they can give a listing or free publicity to the lecture. In most cases, they will even cover the lecture for the school paper. Every month (two weeks before a lecture) you must send a press release (see enclosed press release example) announcing the lecture's title, speaker, place, date, time, info number, etc. along with a brief description and request for a listing in their calendar of events as



well as their covering it for the news. SCS has received tremendous amounts of publicity and requests from interviews simply because every month the media receives a press release from SCS. *This regularly reminds the media about your group's name and objectives!* Pretty soon, someone takes notice and says "Hey, this sounds like an interesting group let's do a story on them." Most papers and radio stations do announce free public lectures and most of our members in SCS have been attracted to our group because they have heard of us through these calendar of event listings. Also through press contacts see if it is possible to arrange a television or radio interview with your host before the event.

**FLYERS:** CSICOP has now on file appropriate artwork and topic descriptions that can be easily fitted to your needs. Descriptions and titles should sound *very exciting*. Exciting titles are very important. Sometimes speakers will suggest dull titles. If this is the case, then politely explain to them that you need to make the title more "sexy." With their cooperation and a little imagination you should be able to succeed. The title, date, time, place, and information number should be boldly displayed. Also announce that books and literature will be available and that the lecture is free and open to the public (if that is the case). Eye-catching artwork is also extremely helpful. Once the flyers are done they should be printed up in very large quantities on colored paper. For example, SCS prints up about 3500 for every lecture at UCLA. 3000 of these flyers are z-folded and 500 unfolded. The cost is about \$70. Three to four days before a lecture the flyers should be posted. (Sooner than this period people forget and later it is too late. Secondly, posted flyers do not last long. Wind will blow them away or they get torn down or other flers get posted on top of them. Timing is crucial.) Find out where all faculty, staff, and student mailboxes are located on campus. Each department usually has mailboxes. Each mailbox should get a folded flyer. The rest of the flyers should be posted in eye-catching areas on every bulletin board you can find, especially look for student hangouts such as cafeterias, student activity centers, and dormitories. The basic philosophy is this. *Everywhere you look on campus you should see a flyer.* Without substantive publicity you will know what is going on but no one else will! Also send flyers to subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer*. This is obviously a fruitful ground for recruits. Mailing labels for local subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer* may be obtained with appropriate notice from CSICOP.

**BROCHURES:** It would be helpful to design a brochure that lists all the information that one would need about the year's lecture series. Some eye-catching artwork on the front cover, and if room permits on the inside, would make your brochure very appealing and more likely to be picked up. See the enclosed samples for some ideas.



**EQUIPMENT:** Make sure you know what equipment the speaker needs, video recorders and monitors, slide projector, overheads, etc. These should be easy to obtain. Also make sure you know how to operate the microphone in the hall. Make sure you have an appropriate sound system. Check the room out *before* giving your first lecture.

**BOOKS AND LITERATURE:** Lectures can be a profit making opportunity for your group. Make sure you have a large enough book table and chairs. You will need a volunteer(s) to lug the books and sell them at each meeting. Have copies of all the back issues of the *Skeptical Inquirer* in addition to the relevant science and pseudoscience titles from Prometheus Press. Good meetings at SCS have sold 800 dollars worth of books. A nice profit for any skeptical group.

**SOLICITING MEMBERS AT MEETINGS:** In your opening remarks at the lecture introduce yourself and talk briefly about the group. Ask people in the audience to raise their hands if they are here for the first time. Once they have raised their hands have a volunteer pass each one of them an information packet. Don't count on people taking information packets that are just left on a table. A more aggressive approach, if handled correctly, is much more effective.

**COST:** Now comes the question everyone is asking; How can a small skeptical group put on such a lecture series with a severely limited income? It would be difficult to raise income for a skeptical group if they did not do something on a regular basis. This lecture series is for local groups that can provide the necessary volunteer staff and have access to free meeting halls through the appropriate channels already mentioned. The only cost is flyers, brochures, mailings to members, travel and possibly honorariums for your speakers. This may seem to add up to a lot of money; however, you will receive money back through new members, books and skeptical propaganda sold, and donations. You may suggest a two or three dollar non-mandatory donation at the door. Explain that it is for the cost of putting on the lecture, travel and speaker expenses, etc. With a minimum of two hundred people showing up that can range from 400 to 600 dollars in *donations alone*. A letter can be sent to your local members and subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer* asking for donations for such a local project. There is also the possibility of applying for grant money through the university or State Department of Education to fund the series. This is something that you will have to enquire about in your own area. SCS's entire program at Cal State, Fullerton is funded by the State of California through education funds provided from the State's lottery fund. The State of California even pays SCS to arrange the series!

WORK INVOLVED: The only real work is setting up the lecture series, which takes a lot of work in the beginning. However, once it is set up there really is not much to do but to attend lectures and sell books as well as have a good time.

QUESTIONS: If you have any further questions you may call Al Seckel, Executive Director of the Southern California Skeptics at 818-791-4543 or write to him at P.O. Box 5523, Pasadena, CA 91107; Ranjit Sandhu or Barry Karr, c/o CSICOP, Central Park Station, P.O. Box 229, Buffalo, N.Y. 14215-0229 or call him at 716-834-3222.