

Department of Chemistry 2026 NEWSLETTER

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Message from the Chair

Greetings from the PLU Chemistry Department!

It has been a few years since the last Department Newsletter (Summer 2022), and we have seen some significant changes in that time as we continue to grow and adapt to a changing landscape.

- We said goodbye to long-time faculty member Dr. Justin Lytle as he left PLU to travel the world, but we had the opportunity to welcome two new amazing colleagues - Dr. Dave Song and Dr. Nerissa Lewis!
- We rebranded our degrees to make them more straightforward for prospective students, now offering a B.A. in Chemistry and B.S. degrees in Chemistry, Biochemistry, and Chemical Physics.
- We have continued a strong culture of student-faculty research in the department funded by external grants and departmental endowed funds in addition to the Natural Sciences Undergraduate Research Program
- We continue to innovate our curriculum to support students and train them for a wide variety of post-PLU endeavors
- After much anticipation, renovation of the Open Lab and Student Research Lab (Rieke 223) will be completed this summer!

Thank you for your continued interest in our activities. I invite you to share news with us by sending me an email at chair@chem.plu.edu. You can stay up to date by visiting our department webpage (<https://www.plu.edu/chemistry/>) and following us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/PLU.chemistry/>)

Fresh faces in the Chemistry Department

It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that we have welcomed two new tenure-track colleagues to the department in the last two years. They bring new ideas and lots of energy! Get to know a little more about them below!

Introducing Dr. Nerissa Lewis



My name is Nerissa Lewis and I am so happy to be a part of the PLU chemistry department. I've just completed my first year at PLU and it's been lots of fun getting to know my colleagues and students. I was born and raised on the beautiful twin island of Trinidad and Tobago, so I am an "island girl" at heart so I enjoy spending time at the beach and enjoying good food!



My research interest focuses on the synthesis and characterization of ligands and their respective metal complexes with potential diagnostic and therapeutic activity for targeted delivery to tumor sites. I am also very passionate about providing a welcoming learning environment, where students can thrive and discover the joy of learning.

When I am not in the classroom or lab, you may likely find me at the gym, dance studio, or somewhere in the mountains hiking with friends. I also enjoy traveling, volunteering at church and community events, listening to music, and meeting new people.

Introducing Dr. Dave Song



Hey there Lutes! It's hard to believe that it's already been two wonderful years at PLU (time flies when you're having fun!). Since joining the PLU Chemistry Department, I have had the pleasure of interacting with supportive colleagues, curious students, and a welcoming campus community. There are so many things to love about my time here, but working closely with my students during class and student hours to see them reach their full potential, as well as mentoring undergraduate researchers to develop confidence in the lab are at the top of the list!

This came to fruition when my NSSURP students were awarded the Murdock Poster Prize in Biochemistry in front of a regional professional audience for their research harnessing minimalist protein designs to investigate important energy conversion processes in biology. Beyond the classroom and animated by the same commitment to relational, student-centered education, I have the privilege of serving as faculty advisor to two faith-based clubs, Dwell and Ignite, as well as the PLU Tennis Club. Outside of my passions for science, education, and Christ-centered community, I enjoy spending time with my wife, golfing, playing tennis, fishing, and reading the Bible.

Focusing on Soft Skills - CHEM 410 Engages students in creative ways

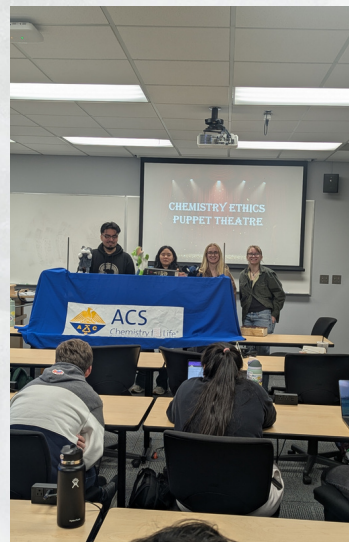
What do puppets and true crime investigations have to do with chemistry? The course entitled Introduction to Research (2 credit hours) incorporated both in its recent iteration in January 2026, taught by Prof. Neal Yakelis. Most students really enjoy this course because it provides a dedicated time in our curriculum to focus on how the landscape of scientific research intersects with their future goals beyond PLU. Some of the course learning activities this past January Term included:

- (1) Small groups presented puppet shows that delved into questions of scientific and research ethics, and then the cast led a follow-up discussion with their peers
- (2) Each student chose three potential career paths to reflect on the rewarding and challenging aspects of the work, estimate costs and timeline of any graduate or professional education, investigate current salary ranges, and identify alumni or professionals they could consult for more information.
- (3) In small groups, students investigated a classic or recent example of scientific misconduct in chemistry and presented a “true crime” style exposé of the case and its implications.

(4) Students learned how to examine recent primary literature to propose new research questions that have not been investigated.

(5) A visit to PLU Career Services featured a workshop by Heather Ellis and Katie Gutierrez-George on crafting up-to-date resumes, CVs, cover letters, and LinkedIn profiles to present themselves most effectively on the job market or in graduate admissions.

A very special thank you to all of our PLU alumni who have communicated with our current students as they navigate challenging questions of their vocation and career path ahead. Talking to other Lutes is impactful and transformative. If you haven't already and would like to be available as a resource to current students or recent alumni, sign up at LuteLink (<https://lutelink.plu.edu/>). If you are interested in connecting with the department and being considered for alumni panels or giving a department seminar, please email chair@plu.edu!



Culture of Research Remains Strong

Twelve students participated in student-faculty chemistry research at PLU summer 2025

Boysen Research Group

Kellen R. Gonsalves

Morgan J. Dlhy

Abby L. Winkler

Munro Research Group

Heidi R. Olea Baez

Becka J. McDougall

Song Research Group

Nicole Gomez Barragan

Kenzie L. Kapralova

Waldow Research Group

W. Jake Park

Camilee M. Boland

Quinn R. Bieber (volunteer)

Yakelis Research Group

Misha K. Turchaninov

Mal I. Rizzo

The Chemistry Department at PLU has always recognized the benefits of involving students in student-faculty research where students can tackle novel research questions, gain valuable laboratory and analytical skills, and better understand the scientific process.

During the 2025 Natural Sciences Summer Undergraduate Research Program, 12 students worked with 5 faculty members on a wide range of research topics. While we appreciate that the College of Natural Sciences supports research across the various scientific disciplines including Chemistry, we are eternally grateful for the endowed funds established and supported by donors and friends of the Chemistry Department to facilitate the breadth of our department's research opportunities! For more information about these funds, as well as ways to contribute to them, please visit

<https://www.plu.edu/chemistry/endowments-scholarships/#4>.

In addition to these individual opportunities for students to work with faculty on their specialized research programs, we have been exploring ways to bring the research experience to more students. One way to do this is through Course-based Undergraduate Research Experiences or CUREs. While some lab courses like Organic Special Projects Lab and Biochemistry II Lab have long been structured as semester-long CUREs, smaller research components are being developed for other laboratory classes such as Analytical Chemistry and others.



PLU Chemistry Hosts 2026 ACS Undergraduate Research Symposium



On Saturday, April 25th, the Pacific Lutheran University Chemistry Department hosted the 2026 American Chemical Society (ACS) Puget Sound Section Undergraduate Research Symposium (URS). The event was a tremendous success, bringing together over 85 attendees from universities across the Pacific Northwest region to celebrate undergraduate research in the chemical sciences.

This year's symposium was particularly special, as it coincided with the historic 150th Anniversary of the American Chemical Society. To mark the milestone, the URS featured a combined total of 31 poster and oral presentations showcasing the talent and hard work of the next generation of chemists. The included image shows the poster session in the Morken Center for Learning and Technology. The energy, curiosity, and collaborative spirit among the students were inspiring.

PLU was well-represented throughout the day's scientific programming. We were thrilled to have 16 of our own PLU students present their work. Furthermore, an event of this magnitude would not have been possible without the dedication of our campus community. The day ran seamlessly thanks to the hard work of PLU Chem Club student volunteers and the invaluable contributions of PLU faculty members who helped organize, mentor, and facilitate the sessions.

Hosting the 2026 URS provided a fantastic opportunity to highlight the Rieke Science Center and reaffirm PLU's deep commitment to undergraduate research and scientific communication. We are proud of all the students who participated!

Research Update from the Boysen Lab



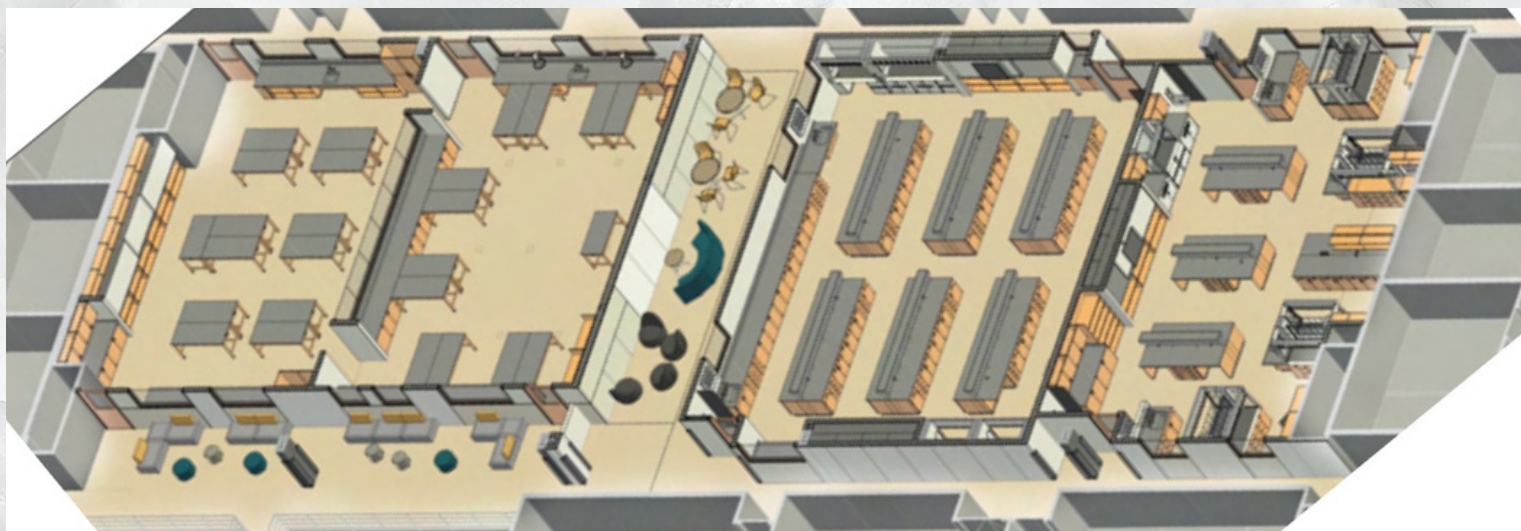
The research group of Dr. Angie Boysen had a productive year, with three students participating in the 2025 Natural Sciences Summer Undergraduate Research program.

Abby Winkler, Morgan Dlhly, and Kellen Gonsalves each worked on projects studying phytoplankton metabolism and conducted weekly sampling of particulate organic matter at Commencement Bay. It all went off without a hitch except for the few weeks when a baby seal took up residence at Old Town Dock, so the team had to find an alternative sampling location! Abby and Kellen continued to work on their data analysis throughout the 25-26 academic year and presented their work in Seattle in May at the University of Washington Undergraduate Research Symposium.

Shiny New Spaces - The Open Lab Reimagined

If you were at PLU in the mid-1980's, you probably remember when the Rieke Science Center opened to much campus fanfare. One of the salient features of this new science facility was the large Open Lab space on the second floor that served Chemistry and Physics Labs. The goal of this space was to provide the department the flexibility of allowing multiple classes to occupy the space at once while also allowing students the flexibility to come in and complete their lab experiments at their own pace at a time that was convenient to them. If you follow the [Chemistry Department Facebook page](#), you may have enjoyed the retrospective posts and pictures about Rieke and the Open Lab in the spring of this year.

This novel arrangement served the department well for several decades, but as university enrollment grew and we served more students, it became harder to accommodate all students to complete the lab exercises at their convenience. If you were a student in the late 2000s and early 2010s, you may remember checking the webcam to see how full the Open Lab was and how long the wait might be before coming to Rieke! In Spring 2013, the Chemistry department switched to scheduling lab sections at defined times to better manage how many students were in the Open Lab at once. Still negotiations for hood space were a weekly occurrence!



After several years of anticipation, planning, and fundraising, the Open Lab in the Rieke Science Center is being renovated this summer. Perhaps the biggest change will be that there will be walls! The Open Lab space will be subdivided into four distinct laboratory spaces (see image above) - 2 for Physics (left) and 2 for Chemistry (right), as well as soft spaces for students to gather. The Chemistry side will be divided into a General/Analytical Lab as well as a Synthetic Organic Lab with an abundance of new energy-efficient hoods. This construction project also brings some much needed improvements to Rieke 223, the Ramstad Student Research Laboratory (not shown).

We are grateful to everyone who has donated to the Rieke Renovation project. All contributions, large and small, have made this possible! We are excited about how the new spaces will expand and improve the laboratory experiences that we can provide our students. As we envision the transition from one shared Open Lab to smaller specialized lab spaces, we know there will be needs for additional glassware and equipment. If you feel inclined to support these needs, we are always grateful for your generosity! You can use this link for ease: plu.edu/give-chem. Stay tuned for a “Grand Opening” or opportunity to come tour the new spaces!

Pictures from the Renovation:

Since construction began in full force at the end of the Spring semester, they have been making tremendous progress as you can see in the pictures below. If you would like to follow along with the finishing touches, you are welcome to visit the project webcam:

plu.edu/Watch-Rieke





May 28, 2026

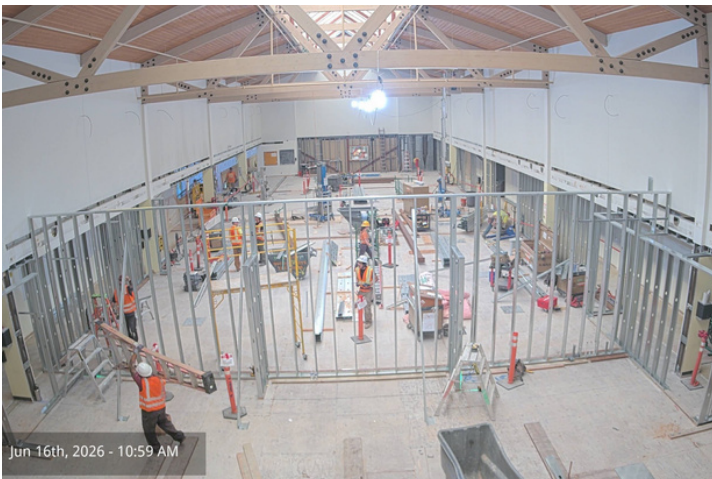
Camera is mounted on the north wall of the Open Lab looking south.

Casework has been removed, and asbestos abatement of hoods has begun.



June 3, 2026

Hoods and carpet have been removed



June 16, 2026

Framing of the walls begins



June 25, 2026

Framing is nearly complete. Ceiling fans are installed.



July 9, 2026

Drywall has been installed and painted.



July 15, 2026

New GypCrete subfloor has been poured. No more soft spots!