

# The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts

## Working Together to Teach Geology at Blinn College (Bryan, TX)

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When I started teaching at Blinn College in the summer of 1996, I was the second of two part-time Geology instructors. Our classroom/lab was located in a converted strip mall, we had an institutional collection of about two dozen rocks stored in baby-wipe tubs, and we approached each new semester with anxiety, hoping that our classes would make.

Our Geology faculty now stands at 5 full time and three part-time instructors (and we are in need of a few more). We have two classroom/labs equipped with state-of-the-art computer/projection equipment, running water and built-in cabinetry, and a prep room bulging with specimens and other teaching materials. We offer multiple sections of three different courses (Physical Geology, Historical Geology, and Oceanography) to nearly 1500 students per year, on campus, through Distance Learning, and in correctional institutions.

I don't think it's an over-estimation to state that we must be doing something right. Of course, much of our growth is due to the overall success of our institution as a whole. We are the major transfer institution for Texas A&M University, with whom we share a medium-sized college town. We also send students on to other four-year institutions in Texas and other states. However, there's more than just having the support of our college and simply being along for the ride that underlies our remarkable growth.

I think the quality that makes Geology such a standout department at Blinn College is that it's genuine. Students get the real deal from us. We are all passionate about the geosciences, and we bring that into the classroom. We are a very talented collective of slightly eccentric individuals, and we each bring to the table a true expertise and depth of knowledge in our specialties. Every of us could have made the turn on our career path toward the publish-or-perish realm of four-year academia. However, each for our own reasons, we find ourselves in the world of 2YC teaching, where the course load is large, the demands are many, and the majors are few. Nonetheless, we refuse to allow our enthusiasm or creativity to be dampened, and we rise to the challenges every day. Students recognize this earnestness in our interactions with them; they can sense that we love what we do, that it's not just a job for us, it's a calling.

With the tone in our classroom set by our dedication, what happen next? Well, of course there's a syllabus, lectures, labs and quizzes. There has to be some organization and structure to provide a framework for the unfolding of the course content. This is where we, as a group, meet our first collective challenge. Some departments at our college take a lockstep, cookie-cutter approach to their syllabi. Deviations from the charted course are not tolerated. On the other hand, other groups have a more laissez-faire, anything-goes approach. That makes for wild inconsistency between sections of a given course, and generates a host of problems involving student expectations, grade distributions, and transferability of the course to four-year schools. With us, we consciously follow a balanced path between these extremes. As our group grows, this has become an increasingly difficult task. We repeatedly revisit this issue during departmental meetings.

Paradoxically, this ongoing dynamic actually seems to be one of the secrets of our success. We avoid becoming petrified and set in our ways, which would dampen the instructor's enthusiasm and result in boring routine for the students. On the other hand, we have a basic shared set of expectations and outcomes in order to hold our students and ourselves on track, guiding instructional activities in a common direction.

The key to this balancing act is a lot of regular communication among our group and keeping alive the inquisitive spirit inside each of us. We share ideas and materials freely. We innovate and exchange. We collect and distribute. We play as a team. We watch for signs of distress among one another, and lend support and suggestions. We take care of each other.

So far I've said a lot about our faculty but not much about geology. How does who we are and how we work together relate to the growth in our enrollment from a handful to hundreds and hundreds? The answer is that we teach by virtue of who we are. We teach out of experience. We develop activities and teaching materials that make the topics come alive for the students. That makes each instructor's section slightly different from the others. In one section students might learn more about caves, in another impact craters. However, with our shared commitment to the general principles in the syllabus, the "basics" are covered while the "specifics" generate the enthusiasm.