Recognizing the Advantages of an Endemic Diverse Population at Mesa Community College

Joanna Scheffler, Mesa Community College

Diversity within the Physical Sciences Department at Mesa Community College (MCC) benefits from the diversity of the college population in general. We do not have a specific strategy that targets underserved populations, perhaps because we do not perceive ourselves as having a lack of diversity in our classes. I say "perceive" since I do not have unbiased data and only have my own unofficial observations to work with. I speak in reference for the main campus where most of my teaching occurs, and for the physical geology classes that comprise the majority of my teaching load. Demographic figures from NSF (2013; data from 2010) clearly show that underrepresented minorities (URM) in national statistics are less underrepresented at MCC. Note: when I think of diversity in my classes compared to many four-year schools I also include veterans, parents, single parents, working students, working students with families, students with disabilities, and other groups that do not always appear in the demography lists. All sorts of people populate my classes!

The apparent diversity in these classes is probably a function of the fact that since most people at MCC need to meet a lab science requirement, students across all demographics opt for what is still perceived as a non-intimidating science. Therefore, our physical geology class populations are a microcosm of the general student body. In my experience the diversity of my classes is one of the most appealing aspects of teaching. The flip side of the demographics is that we may be complacent about encouraging minority groups to pursue the geosciences. Furthermore, as result of so many students taking our classes because they "needed a lab science and this one sounded easier than chemistry or physics" (paraphrased from my students' feedback), we assume too often that hardly any of our students are interested in earth science majors anyway.

One could summarize the situation in our department as this: most of us instructors are happy if we nurture a STEM tendency in any of our students, but maybe we should start looking more at encouraging URM to pursue the geosciences. We forget that while we have plenty of diversity in our classes, the nationwide science population is not so heterogeneous. At MCC it is currently up to individual instructors to consider the possibilities and exercise their own plan of action in encouraging diverse people to continue in our field. I think we are fortunate that we do not have to work hard to fill our classes with students of all stripes; however, rather than coasting on status quo we should consider how we encourage them to continue in the geosciences.

http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/wmpd/2013/tables.cfm

http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/N/Donna.J.Nelson-1/diversity/Faculty_Tables_FY07/07Report.pdf

http://www.maricopa.edu/about/?demographics