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Geology Program

Igniting the Spark

Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) lies just outside of Washington, D.C. and caters to the metropolitan Washington, D.C. community. The College consists of eight campuses and centers with a combined enrollment of approximately 50,000 students. The College is under the direction of a single president with each campus under the direction of a separate Provost. Five of the campuses offer classes under the geology program, although no degrees are presently offered in geology. Students pursuing geology as a major will graduate with an Associates of Science in Science (A.S. Science), and then transfer to a degree granting four-year institution. George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia is the school of choice for most of the geology concentrators, but others have transferred to colleges such as Wellesley College, Georgetown University, Dalhousie University, and U.C. Santa Cruz as well as others. The college has recently been working with the U.S.G.S in Reston, Virginia to create a Physical Science Technician Associates of Applied Science degree (A.A.S Physical Science Technician). Graduates holding this degree will be eligible to intern at the U.S.G.S. or be hired as a Physical Science Technician at the U.S.G.S. This program is in the process of being created. Three students with strong geology backgrounds were chosen to intern at the U.S.G.S. this summer. NVCC also offers an assortment of low credit general interest courses meant to appeal to a wide cross-section of the local community. The overarching goal of the geology program at NVCC is to provide the very earliest direction to students interested in the earth sciences and foster a life-long interest in the physical sciences. Many of the NVCC students who later complete their B.S. in Geology or a related field (or go on for graduate studies) entered NVCC with plans of pursuing other non-earth science careers. As a teacher of geology at NVCC, I feel I am interacting with these students at perhaps their earliest exposure to earth sciences and as a result can easily become the “wind in their sails” or “wreckage on a reef”, for their future career paths.

The greatest strength of our geology program, I feel, is its location in Washington, D.C.. Besides the fact that Washington is a beautiful city, we have easy access to some of the best museum collections in the world, many world class institutions of higher learning, a wide variety of both public and private environmental businesses and departments, and access to a highly qualified and exceptionally diverse human resource pool for lecturers and faculty. We are also one of the least expensive colleges in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. region with a track record of providing excellent educational opportunities.

The large size of our college and its sprawling multi-campus character, in addition to the transient two-year tenure of most of our students, provide the biggest challenge to the geology program. Interaction amongst geology students at different campuses is challenged, to say the least. Any change within the program must be strongly coordinated amongst the five major campuses offering geology courses, and therefore best actualized through a top down approach. This makes it extremely difficult for any single person with a great idea on one campus to alter the established character of the program without first battling their way to the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy. I’ve glimpsed the top only a few times. The high teaching load (three lectures and three laboratories per semester) makes it difficult to maintain any active research program. Additionally the college provides few resources for faculty to pursue research.

The geology program at NVCC offers many of the introductory courses, and a few advanced courses, for anyone interested in pursuing a career or interest in the earth sciences. We have a talented group of geologists that are all passionate and professional about their teaching. We provide students with the fundamentals that they will need to make decisions about their future careers and some insights and direction at a formative period in their earth science pursuits. One disadvantage of interacting with earth science students so early and briefly in their careers, is the difficulty in following up with them when they have become better established and accomplished in their field. It’s a small price for being around in the beginning to see the spark ignite.