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### **Is Workforce Training The Critical Link To Get Students Engaged?**

Teaching geology at a moderately-sized community college in southeast Virginia has taught me that most students coming into my classes 1) are there because they need to satisfy their lab-science/general education requirements, 2) perceive geology to be either “easier” or “more interesting” than physics, chemistry, or biology, and 3) really have no clue what geology is about. As the ever-optimistic instructor, I’ve forged ahead with my classes expecting that enthusiasm, dynamic and interactive lectures and labs, and attempting to use details to construct “the big-picture” would lead to the new generation of geoscientists. Increasingly, I’ve learned that my students want to see connections to “the real world” and that they have little to no concept of what geoscientists “do”. As I’ve started incorporating more real-world examples into my classes, I have heard more and more to the effect of “yeah it’s interesting, but what am I going to do with geology?”. Apparently a meaningful barrier still exists for my students studying the geosciences in more detail, and it seems that stronger connections to the workforce could help elucidate what geologists actually “do”, providing my students with more relevant examples of geology and that critical link to what they could do after leaving my class.

Our Geology Department has employed several strategies to expose students to careers in geosciences. A few years ago, we started a “Jobs in Geosciences Lecture Series”, which brought two professional geoscientists onto campus each semester. Our invited lecturers came from our personal network of friends and colleagues, and we had no issues finding folks willing to come to campus for a few hours. During each lecture, we asked our guests to talk about what they do in their jobs, what sort of technical and academic background they needed, and how they, personally, ended up in their current job. We received funding through our Educational Foundation to provide an honorarium to each speaker and to provide pizza and drinks for each lecture. Along with the lecture, we also scheduled an hour “meet & eat” with each guest, so that students had the opportunity to talk with each speaker in an informal setting and gain a more personal explanation about each professional’s path. Survey data collected from students who participated in these programs demonstrated that our students greatly enjoyed these lectures, learned a lot, and desired for more opportunities like these.

More recently, we have tried to forge connections with local employers to explore any type of exposure to professional activities for our students. Establishing formal internships would be ideal, but financial and practical limitations with businesses and difficulty scheduling and training our students seem to be the biggest barriers. However, exploring opportunities for shadowing programs, informal internships, and meeting new professionals interested in contributing to our lecture series seem to be the most fruitful and immediate opportunities. Perhaps in the future, the relationships created with our local businesses could lead to a formal geo-technician certificate/training program, which would be unique within our state’s assembly of community colleges. Overall, we feel that our existing program that provides students opportunities to do small-scale research projects, fieldwork, and work in small groups to communicate their science will become even more effective by strengthening the understanding of what geoscientists do in their respective day-to-day routines, teaching the skills and techniques commonly used by professionals and researchers alike, and developing more obvious partners within the workforce.