

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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As you read this, my third president's message, October is here, and we're well into autumn. The leaves are turning here in the Midwest and the nation's college campuses are abuzz with the activity of another academic year. Here in Columbus, college football is king and the Buckeyes are well into their season. My older daughter Cassie is in her senior year at THE Ohio State University and my younger daughter Ashleigh, a high school senior, is trying to decide whether to follow in her sister's footsteps or start college next year somewhere else. Our two summer environmental health interns at Columbus Public Health, Bob Gilreath of Bowling Green State University and Kari Jones of Ohio University, are long gone and back on their respective campuses. All the activity makes me think back to my days on the campus of Indiana State University in Terre Haute. I look at my class ring that I still wear every day—etched in its side is the tower of the Tiry Memorial Union, although the clock at the top has worn away with the passage of time. In many ways it was the best time of my life. I'll never forget those days where my future was forged, pursuing a degree in environmental health. I do wish the Sycamores would win a football game or two this season; they haven't for a while! In fact, as of this writing my alma mater holds the longest losing streak in the nation at 31 games! ☹

Autumn is a good time to reflect on just how important a college education is and what it means to our profession. As a professional organization—and as individual

I Love College!



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NEHA members—we must cultivate and nurture our academic partners and especially reach out to the students who have made the choice to enter our profession. I'd like to break it down and discuss what we as individual NEHA members can do on our own to encourage and support our environmental health students, then I'd like to offer some

ideas about what we as NEHA (the premier national organization representing our profession) can do nationally to support our undergraduate student body.

I reread Immediate Past President Welford Roberts' president's message from last April, entitled "Mentoring: How You Can Touch and Shape the Future of Environmental Health," and as I read through it again, I realized he was largely talking about mentoring in the context of experienced professionals shaping the careers of young professionals new to the job. I couldn't agree with him more on the subject, but I want to express what we as practitioners can do to influence and inspire our undergraduates.

Except for some seniors who may have had an internship experience, by the beginning of senior year the majority of EH undergraduates do not have any hands-on experience and may not be certain what environmental health really is. They have declared the environmental health major and may have taken a wide variety of related courses. But they may doubt they have selected the right major, especially in this era of downsizing and governmental cutbacks. As environmental health practitioners, we really need to seek out those students through their academic programs to let them see and hear us. If you live near an accredited program, volunteer to be on their advisory board or to visit one of their classes as a guest lecturer to tell the students some tales from the trenches. When you are on campus, talk to the students one-on-one about their future careers. They will eat it

up, let me tell you. At our Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, seek them out. We generally have a slew of students at our conferences and I've heard that they sometimes feel ignored. Don't let that happen! Engage them. Make them feel they are a part of the profession they've chosen. Visit the student lounge at the annual conference. Did you even know there was one? It will have a lasting effect. Advocate at your agency or private-sector employer to establish an internship program if none exists. We've had a robust internship program at Columbus Public Health for eight years now and we've hired back some seven former interns as sanitarians. An internship provides a great opportunity for the student, of course, but it also provides employers a great way to gauge who they would like to hire back after observing the interns.

The majority of new professionals entering our field do not come out of those 33 accredited undergraduate programs. Reaching out to those students while they are still in school is of course more problematic since we don't know who they are. The route we must choose then is to embrace those programs that are dedicated to producing environmental health practitioners and to promote the expansion of those programs to broad-based institutions of higher learning. If no accredited program exists in your state, find out why. By working with both the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) and the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP), those institutions can be professionally approached. New environmental programs start out exactly that way. AEHAP is currently working with a number of institutions of higher education prior to their submission to the EHAC as they seek accreditation approval.

What can NEHA do to strengthen our ties to the academic community and especially to reach out to those undergraduates and welcome them to our profession? NEHA in fact currently does a great deal for students. Tremendous discounts are offered for AEC & Exhibition registration, and the student membership fee of only \$25 is the special "graduate" rate for the first year of full membership. The American Academy of Sani-

tarians (AAS) and NEHA jointly sponsor a national scholarship competition for both graduates and undergraduates. Additionally, many of our state affiliate organizations also sponsor scholarship programs.

I think we can do more. We can improve the relationship in several areas and I'd like to outline them here.

First, I believe we need a national identity specifically geared toward the academic community. That's why I will propose a resolution at our next board meeting to formally develop such a presence. I'm thinking along the lines of a national identity for the various environmental health clubs and honorary societies presently on accredited campuses now or for new ones yet to organize. The AEHAP student assembly, a council of student leaders of environmental health clubs located at accredited universities, wants to meet annually at the AEC & Exhibition. They want to have input about workshop content and the types of offerings presented to students. I say, "Bully to that!" Second, both Immediate Past President Welford Roberts and Pat Bohan, of the accredited program at Oklahoma's East Central University, have agreed to work on student issues on behalf of NEHA this year. Third, I encourage our state affiliates to "adopt" the accredited programs in their area and if not already a component of the regular affiliate meetings, bring them in. Students are always short on cash, so some concessions will need to be made on the associated costs, but I submit in the long run it's worth it.

Perhaps the most important thing we can do is make a better effort to get EH students to our AEC & Exhibition. We must work around some natural impediments to do so. Our AEC & Exhibition is generally in June; if the school is on the semester system, they're already out for the summer and the seniors are on internships. If the college is on quarters, they may be having finals at that time. Still, a fair number of students find ways to attend the conference. I think we must be prepared to make some more concessions to get more students participating in our national conference. We need to seek out new ways to make the AEC & Exhibition affordable for students. One thing we can do is to give our nonstudent registrants the opportunity when they register

to check a box and donate what they feel would be appropriate to a "student travel fund" to help mitigate travel expenses for students. Hopefully, our affiliates can find a way to support a student or two from their state to help them with the travel costs associated with attending an AEC & Exhibition. The goal here is that if the students have a good experience at the conference—and most importantly, feel welcome and valued—then when they enter the profession they will be members of NEHA for life. I'd like to target next summer's AEC & Exhibition in Columbus to get more environmental health students to attend than we've ever had before, and to make them feel special for attending. NEHA is presently working to secure affordable housing in dormitories while they are in Columbus. AAS has established a mentoring program and will be actively making an effort to reach out and give the students some one-on-one attention at the Columbus event. The AEHAP student research competition is also a great opportunity for our undergraduate and graduate environmental health students. This competition has been a nice way to bring students to the conference and it would be wonderful if even more students applied. NEHA made headway with the Albuquerque AEC & Exhibition last summer with its "virtual conference" debut. It was a successful initiative and can be expanded in future years with the EH undergraduate in mind. I can see a time when college lectures are enhanced by speakers from the virtual conference.

As the academic year gets into full swing, think about what you could do to make a difference in an aspiring young environmental health student's outlook on his or her chosen profession. Reach out and make a difference! Talk to the program directors at those institutions and make them aware of your availability. You can find their contact information on the EHAC Web site at www.ehacoffice.org/accred-prog/under-prog.php. Be sure to mention NEHA. Remember what it was like when you were a poor student and could have used a little direction. And also, here's hoping the Fighting Sycamores can break their dismal streak! 🐾

