Eastern Kentucky University’s (EKU’s) Environmental Health Science (EHS) program and the entire EHS profession suffered a great loss on August 9, 2014, when our colleague and my good friend Professor Joe Beck passed away. I have decided to do my column on one of Joe’s last papers he sent me. Joe was always writing, since that was his second favorite thing to do. His first love was teaching.

Joe used very frequently the quote, “We have got to get our story out” from Nelson Fabian, the former executive director of NEHA, who used it in numerous articles. It is time for all of us in the profession to join in this refrain and realize that we have a story of incredible achievements and successes. Ours is a truly fantastic story that we all need to tell.

Over the last 60 years our success has been obscured by the constant change brought about by new agencies with new missions, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Energy, Department of Labor, and the numerous agencies that have arisen at the state and local levels that deal with mirror issues. The importance of our profession can be observed daily from news reports of emerging diseases transmitted from the environment along with the statistics show most remain in the profession until retirement. Salary scales have gradually moved up until they reflect the complexity of the job and the hours of study necessary to be counted among our profession. It is interesting to realize that the number of credit hours of university science required by our degree is close in number and intensity to a degree in forensic science or one of the premed majors.

I recently googled “environmental health safety entry level jobs” and found 2,985 entry-level environmental health jobs, which did not even include government jobs. A popular Web site provides current salaries for environmental health graduates with a BS degree. The 2011 median pay was $81,500 with 10+ years of experience and an entry-level education bachelor’s degree in environmental health and safety. Qualified replacements with an EHS degree entering the workforce number less than 1,000 graduates per year from accredited programs.

How come we do not have hundreds of students at the first-year level waiting to get into environmental health? Well, the answer is our failure to tell the story, especially to people who influence young people. It is essential that we solve this problem if our profession is ever going to function at its true potential. The reality is that literally hundreds of jobs are available currently for a graduate with a BS degree in environmental health. The reality is that many of these jobs are going to be filled by people with often no or very poor preparation. These people then become supervisors who are often afraid to hire people with optimal preparation.

We must get our story out and follow through with students letting them know of the career satisfaction of working in this field. We should be evoking pride in the current working environmental health professionals about the environment that they have helped create. Many of us have entered the field without a BS in environmental health, but it’s time for us to promote what we have had a role in creating—an individual with a BS in environmental health.

Those of us who have entered the profession of environmental health without a BS degree in the field should be proud of the fact that we have recognized our educational shortcomings and have reeducated and retrained ourselves on the job. We should be equally proud that we have been a part of the creation of these undergraduate degrees in our
profession. When possible we should always try to hire people better prepared than we have been, but the prime responsibility lies with the academics preparing people for entry into this field. This is the reason EKU’s EHS department has created a formula for getting the story out about the incredible opportunities for those who possess a BS in environmental health, particularly now that the pay is truly outstanding for someone with a bachelor’s. Most professions require a master’s degree to become employed. In environmental health, the bachelor’s degree is still the gold standard.

The young people to whom we should be selling the opportunity to work in environmental health are individuals wanting to make a difference; not doing the same thing day after day; having the opportunity to meet people and travel; and having the opportunity to relocate for better paying jobs. Do we need a TV program related to environmental health? No, the real answer is our individual communication with people who influence the next generation’s lives. Here is EKU’s EHS department’s template for getting the story out about this great secret—our profession. Although this template was devised by Joe for EHS programs, EHS professionals can do numerous things to get more young people into the profession. Joe knew that the future of environmental health lies with the next generation.

**Action number 1:** Talk to anyone you meet about our profession. Talk with passion and the incredible journey through life that is allowed us. EHS professionals can volunteer to talk to science classes one day a year at local schools.

**Action number 2:** Place your best and most passionate educators, your rock stars in the classroom, for teaching the introductory courses in environmental health. If you are a professional, volunteer to be a guest lecturer or even better an adjunct lecturer.

Realize the presence of a passionate instructor at the front of a room teaching a course can be a very persuasive force. Likewise realize that web courses, unless they include a significant chapter about the profession and its history of achievement, are not likely to attract anyone. Use web-based courses extremely carefully, as it is very difficult to make a personal connection with a student. In addition, our field involves interaction with people, which is something that cannot be evaluated online.

**Action number 3:** Create an advisory council for your environmental health program using the state and regional leaders in environmental health as advisors. Solicit from them their advice on any changes they would recommend to your curriculum to ensure that your students are the best qualified to meet their workforce demands. Form partnerships with these individuals and their agencies for the promotion of education in environmental health.

**Action number 4:** Create a diversity task force comprised of minorities both inside and outside of environmental health. Let the task force know about the personal opportunities as well as the outstanding work opportunities. Explain with all sincerity of your belief in a diversified workforce and the opportunities that exist for graduates of diversity. Act upon their recommendations for recruitment of minorities in terms of types of messages and how to effectively communicate the life-changing opportunities.

**Action number 5:** Contact your state’s association of school guidance counselors and offer to present about this incredible occupation that has been kept so secret. While presenting to the association, convey the values that are reflected in EHS professionals, especially the ability to go home every night and feel that the world is no worse because of your existence and might even be a great deal better. If possible, schedule a presentation or a booth each year at the counselors’ association.

**Action number 6:** At least once each year, invite science teachers from two-year technical schools, two-year junior colleges, and if possible, high school teachers who deal with the sciences to campus, or better yet go to their school. Bring in successful graduates who can talk about going through the program and what they’re currently doing.

**Action number 7:** Invite any university advisors of undeclared freshman to your department for a morning or afternoon of show and tell.

**Action number 8:** Consider development of 100- and 200-level courses designed to appeal to undeclared students that discuss environmental health. For example, EKU created a highly successful course for attracting new majors called “Diseases of Leisure” designed to appeal to a wide range of students, particularly those who like the outdoors. Realize that no course should be designed specifically for recruitment but they should all be designed to achieve optimum education and training in those areas.

Of course, additional actions can be done to get the word out about this fantastic career that we refer to as environmental health science. As in all good news, the potential dark side to the story is out there if we do not act now. If we fail to get our story out then the powerful forces of supply and demand will take over. Should this happen we can expect to see the job market fracture into many specialties, each requiring its own license, and having no commonality of education and training. The job market is currently attempting to do this due to the shortage of appropriately educated and trained individuals.

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**An In Memoriam for Joe Beck**

An In Memoriam for Joe Beck will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal* highlighting Joe’s memorable life and career. If you would like to share a memory or comment about Joe to be considered for inclusion, please e-mail Kristen Ruby-Cisneros at kruby@neha.org.