Students can be important link between academia and practice

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If you have been following the concerns about the aging of the professional environmental health workforce, the importance of succession planning, and the drive to enhance the professional qualifications of environmental public health practitioners, then it should come as no surprise that students represent an important piece of the puzzle for solving this environmental health workforce issue. Students graduating from bachelor degree programs in environmental health, accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC), are in high demand for entry-level positions with public and private sector employers.

First, these students have a rigorous background in the natural and physical sciences. Second, they have gained an understanding of practical experience in the field through their practice-based education and work done during their required internship. Many of these student internships are performed on site with local, state, and federal health agencies; environmental protection agencies; private sector manufacturing; and other businesses practicing industrial hygiene and safety, including engineering and consulting firms. Third, many of these students have gone beyond sitting in the classroom and participating in a practical internship and have actively engaged with research that confirms, expands, and/or challenges our knowledge of environmental factors and conditions that affect human health and well-being.

Since 2005, the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) has conducted a Student Research Competition, inviting both undergraduate and graduate students from EHAC-accredited institutions to submit a paper detailing a current research project in which they have played a significant role. Through funding provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/National Center for Environmental Health (CDC/NCEH, award no. EH13-1304) and NSF International, AEHAP has been able to provide...
a monetary award and travel support to bring outstanding students to the National Environmental Health Association’s (NEHA) Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition each year to present their research findings.

The recent recipients of the AEHAP Student Research Competition award are listed below.

2016
- **Scott Biebas**, Undergraduate Student, Baylor University
  Research: Residual Soil Lead in an Urban Residential Neighborhood in West Dallas Affected by Historic Lead Smelter Activities
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Trey Brown
- **Ethan Fuhrman**, Undergraduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
  Research: Airborne Particulates Around Frac Sand Plants Using EPA-Certified Instrument
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Crispin Pierce
- **Marissa Taylor**, Undergraduate Student, Western Carolina University
  Research: Identification of La Crosse, Dengue, Chikungunya, and Zika Vectors Collected From Sticky Traps Using Morphological and Molecular Methods
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Brian Byrd
- **Joshua Volkan**, Graduate Student, East Carolina University
  Research: Evaluation of Barrier Sprays for Mosquito Control in Eastern North Carolina
  Faculty mentors: Drs. Stephanie Richards and Jo Anne Balanay

2015
- **Amanda Bewley**, Undergraduate Student, West Chester University
  Research: GMO Corn and Incidence of Insecticide-Related Injuries
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Charles Shorten
- **Linzi Thompson**, Undergraduate Student, East Central University
  Research: UV Photoactivation of Titanium Dioxide Nanoparticles: Enhanced Photo-oxidation of Natural Organic Matter in Aqueous Systems
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Doug Weirick
- **Abigail Tompkins**, Undergraduate Student, Western Carolina University
  Research: Fog Machine Aerosol Nanoscale Characterization
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Burton Ogle
- **Adam Mannarino**, Graduate Student, East Carolina University
  Research: Noise Exposure Assessment Among Groundskeepers: A Pilot Study
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Jo Anne Balanay

Below is a list of the recent NSF International Scholars.
- **2016: Melanie Keil**, Undergraduate Student, Colorado State University
  Research: Examining Use of Third Party Standards in Municipal Drinking Water System Plumbing Component Regulations and Recommendations
  Faculty mentor: Dr. Judy Heiderscheidt
- **2015: Natasha Borgen**, Undergraduate Student, University of Washington
  Faculty mentor: Chuck Treser

These are just a few examples of the students who are better prepared to address traditional and emerging environmental health threats. These students are able and eager to tackle the challenges presented by emerging infectious diseases; legacy toxic chemicals and materials polluting the land and water; an international food supply with transportation issues, new processes, and ingredients; occupational health and safety problems as the economy transforms from manufacturing to service industries; and more.

Guiding and supporting these students is something we can all do. Environmental health students benefit when they engage with practitioners and the whole profession benefits from the enthusiasm many students bring to meetings and interactions. In both academic and nonacademic work, there are few greater rewards than mentoring and encouraging students who are capable of successful careers in our profession.

Custard (2016) wrote the following:
The professional legacy each of us leaves will not be in the programs we created or the awards we were honored with, but in the young professionals we trained, mentored, encouraged, and inspired (p. 7). AEHAP fully agrees. Collectively, NEHA members can support students and career development in some way. First, we can all visit with students and be inquisitive during student presentations at NEHA’s AEC and at state or regional affiliate meetings. Second, students may need mentors for internships or practical projects that generate results warranting presentation. Mentorship is a highly rewarding experience and many practitioners are near an EAHAC-accredited school that would welcome project ideas, mentors, and practical experience opportunities for their students. Third, we can continue to identify and implement better strategies for encouraging greater levels of student participation and engagement in our state affiliate conferences.

Reviews for the 2017 AEHAP and NSF International student competitions are underway for the NEHA 2017 AEC in Grand Rapids, MI, which will have a session spotlighting top student research. The benefits and excitement generated from these student research competitions are known fully by the folks who attend their presentations and help make these programs possible.

Please be sure to thank Dr. David Gilkey, Colorado State University, for championing these programs for the last several years through 2016. Please welcome Dr. Clint Pinion, Eastern Kentucky University, for taking over duties this year as chair of these competitions. In addition, the competition is greatly enhanced for the students through the support of CDR Jasen Kunz (CDC/NCEH), Stan Hazen (NSF International), and Dr. David Dyjack (NEHA) for increasing student visibility and engagement at NEHA’s AEC.

On behalf of our students and member programs, we look forward to seeing you at the NEHA 2017 AEC in Grand Rapids!

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**Reference**