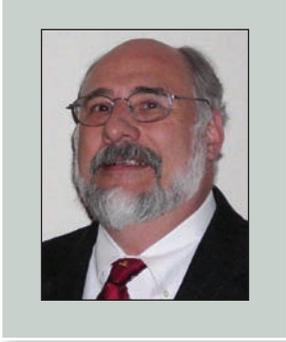


▶ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Bob Custard,
REHS, CP-FS

Building the Future Environmental Health Workforce

The baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) are retiring. This is the generation that in 1970 sponsored the first Earth Day and gave birth to the environmental movement. This is the generation that initially populated the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's workforce and similar state-level agencies across the country with responsibility for air quality, water quality, solid waste, and hazardous materials.

Over the next 20 years the retiring baby boom generation will take many years of environmental health experience and a lot of hard-won wisdom out of public health agencies, environmental protection agencies, and private companies. As this generational change occurs, there will be numerous environmental health positions left vacant by retirement that will need to be filled. Educating and training new environmental health professionals should be a national public health goal.

What Is NEHA Doing?

NEHA is committed to helping develop the environmental health workforce of the future. To learn how to better serve students, NEHA surveyed the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) and the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) members in attendance at the NEHA Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition last July. As a result of the input gained from those surveys, NEHA is taking the following steps to help students jump start their environmental health careers:

- NEHA officers and regional vice presidents are being encouraged to visit the EHAC-

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accredited environmental health academic programs around the country and speak to students about environmental health career paths. For example, I will be speaking to the students at Eastern Kentucky University in mid-February.

- The NEHA board of directors has asked its membership committee to help interested parties form a new Student National Environmental Health Association (SNEHA).
- NEHA will more actively encourage employers to advertise environmental health jobs through the NEHA Web site.
- NEHA will encourage more educational institutions, in particular those institutions that offer an environmental health program, to join NEHA as educational institution members.
- At future AECs, a student registration will now include tickets for all the food func-

tions that are included in a regular conference registration such as the Exhibition Grand Opening & Party.

- The student AEC registration fee for 2016 will be only \$180 (a 69% savings off the cost of regular member registration).
- Student AEC registration will now include a one-year, E-Journal-only NEHA student membership.
- To make NEHA's AEC more relevant to the millennial generation (those born between 1982 and 2004), the 2016 AEC will include a conference session that will be designed, arranged, and managed by recent college graduates. AEHAP will oversee development of this conference track.
- The deadline for students to submit to present at the AEC Student Poster Session will be extended until later in the year so that more students can present their research.
- NEHA participated in the American Public Health Association's 2015 Annual Conference panel session to shine a light on the emerging environmental health workforce, its needs, and opportunities for the future.
- NEHA has secured initial funding to conduct a national needs assessment of the existing environmental public health workforce. This assessment will provide greater insight into the needs and opportunities of the incoming workforce. NEHA will also continue to assist students as follows:
 - Providing deeply discounted memberships to students. The \$15 student membership dues is an 84% savings compared to the cost of regular membership.

- Sponsoring a special session for student research presentations at the AEC.
- Recognizing outstanding student research through awards at the AEC.
- Together with the American Academy of Sanitarians, sponsoring academic scholarships for environmental health students.
- Working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health to award summer internship opportunities to deserving environmental health students.

What Can NEHA's Affiliates Do?

Many NEHA affiliates are actively engaged in helping students through their scholarship programs. For example, the Michigan Environmental Health Association (MEHA) has grown its endowment fund to more than \$100,000 by earmarking a small portion of each member's dues for the endowment fund and by hosting fundraising events such as clay shoots, raffles, and golf outings. The earnings from the MEHA endowment fund are used to fund scholarships and special projects each year.

Most NEHA affiliates offer students highly discounted memberships. For example, student membership in the National Capitol Area Environmental Health Association is just \$5.00.

Similarly, many affiliates offer students greatly reduced prices on registrations for their annual educational conference. The Texas Environmental Health Association, for example, charges students just \$25.00 to attend their three-day AEC. (Regular members pay \$300.)

Some affiliates partner with the environmental health programs at universities in their state by locating their conferences on or near campus so that it is easy for students to attend. Several years ago, for example, the Virginia Environmental Health Association held their Spring Educational Conference at Old Dominion University. Several professors were invited as speakers.

Going forward, we would like to encourage our affiliates to help develop the future environmental health workforce in the following ways:

- Reaching out to environmental health students to get them involved in meaningful ways in their NEHA affiliate;
- Expanding their student scholarship programs;

- Creating educational conferences that are conveniently located and affordable for students;
- Sending outstanding environmental health professionals to universities to speak about career opportunities in environmental health; and
- Sponsoring SNEHA affiliates at the universities in their state that have environmental health academic programs.

What Can Employers Do?

Employers in both government and private industry can also play an important role in helping develop the future environmental health workforce. Specifically they can do the following:

- Provide internship and volunteer opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience applying their environmental health knowledge;
- Encourage their outstanding staff members to mentor young environmental health professionals; and
- Advertise their job openings on NEHA's Web site and in publications like the *JEH* so that more graduating students become aware of the opportunities open to them.

What Can Universities Do?

The de Beaumont Foundation recently published research suggesting that the ninth most popular undergraduate degree in the U.S. is public health. Universities with strong environmental health programs are one of the prime sources of qualified candidates for the future environmental health workforce. Many of today's environmental health leaders came from these programs.

Most of these universities have strong practicum or internship programs. For example, Western Carolina University has an outstanding program for placing their students in North Carolina state and local environmental health, emergency preparedness, and industrial hygiene agencies. They also collaborate with the U.S. Public Health Service internship program.

Some environmental health academic programs like Eastern Kentucky University pay for each of their students to take the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) exam immediately after graduation. This credentialing provides a significant advantage to these

students as they look for their first full-time environmental health job.

Going forward, we would like to encourage environmental health academic programs as follows:

- Continue expanding their internship and practicum programs. A job applicant's practical experience is a significant factor in the hiring decisions of environmental health managers.
- Ensure that each of their students has the opportunity to take the REHS/RS exam immediately after graduation.
- Create a SNEHA affiliate chapter on their campus that will enrich the professional experience of their students.
- Synergistically collaborate with their state or regional NEHA affiliate to create events or educational conferences that benefit both students and environmental health professionals in the field.

What Can You Do?

Successful environmental health practice is as much about the values we bring to the job as it is about the scientific knowledge we apply. It has often been said that "values are caught, not taught." What values are our colleagues "catching" from us? Are our actions teaching integrity, patience, persistence, and dependability? Are we relentless learners that strive for professional excellence?

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. I encourage you to do three things:

- Bring your best to work each day and model the values for which you wish to be remembered. Help your colleagues "catch" your positive attitudes and passion for environmental health.
- Be a mentor to your younger colleagues. Leave a legacy of excellence and kindness by teaching those who follow you the skills of our profession.
- Invest in a student with a generous donation to the NEHA Scholarship Fund. To donate to NEHA's Scholarship Fund go to www.neha.org/donate. 🙏

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