

Fieldwork: It May Be More Important Than You Think

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Learning how to do field work is one of the most important activities that you should learn as a geology student. Fieldwork is a vital part of any geology student's curriculum and is applicable no matter what field of geology you may want to enter into when you graduate. Many of the contributors for the previous student issue of TPG touched upon this, and I feel that it is necessary to expand on the topic.

Learning geology from the textbooks and in the classroom is a great way to learn the basics, but the geology as encountered in the field is not as clear-cut and controlled as it may be presented in pictures or in carefully crafted laboratory exercises. Perfect textbook examples of geologic occurrences are more often the exception than the rule. In order to gain a more accurate understanding of the geology of an area, some experience in the field is necessary. To illustrate this concept, consider the education of the aspiring doctor. Medical students have to spend hundreds of hours working in a hospital before they can be considered a practicing professional. They are given the chance to see all the different types of medical cases that could arise while at the same time developing expertise in how to care for their patients confidently. With this in mind, would you want a doctor to operate on you if the only experience he or she has had with medicine is through textbooks and journal articles? The situation is no different in the field of geology. Fieldwork gives a student the experience to be a practicing geologist that can have the expertise and confidence to create quality work.

Knowing that having experience in the field is important, professors would incorporate more field experience into their classes and laboratory exercises, right? Well, that, actually, is not so often the case. Doing fieldwork with students

can be time consuming, legally precarious, and expensive. Some professors may find that they cannot spare the extra time to incorporate field experience into a class. Others may find that they do not want to deal with the legal uncertainties involved with taking students out into the field where anything can happen. Then there are the funding shortages that many schools, particularly state institutions, are experiencing. An administrator looking to slim the budget may see an excursion into the field as an extraneous trip that can be cut instead of a necessary part of learning. Whatever the reason, more emphasis is being placed on attending field camp as the best way to learn how to do geology in the field rather than incorporating it somehow into every class.

Although I am sure that there are many comprehensive field camps out there, the fact remains that there is only so much that a student can learn in six-weeks. In fact, if you have never done fieldwork before, the whole situation can really be rather traumatic. The first time that I did a real mapping project I just could not get it. Comprehensively thinking of things on such a large scale was a difficult concept for me to grasp at first. I am just lucky that my undergraduate field course spanned an entire semester and that many of my other classes also included fieldwork. The more time I spent in the field, the more skilled I became and the more I was able to understand. This type of curriculum where there is constant exposure to fieldwork should be the norm and not the exception.

Well, then, you may be asking yourself, "What am I to do to gain experience in the field?" First, don't simply rely on



your classes to supply all of your learning experiences. It may be up to you to make sure that you have had enough experience working in the field. To get you started, here are just some of the ways to gain experience in the field:

1. Take a field class:

A field class is a great way to learn all of the basic field techniques, such as geologic mapping and structural analysis. If your school does not offer a field class, you should sign yourself up for a summer field camp through another institution. It would be well worth the time and money.

2. Work with a professor on his or her research:

If there is a professor at your school that is working on a field project that interests you, ask him or her if you could help out. The chances are good that the professor would say yes. Perhaps you could make it part of an independent study project or just volunteer for the experience. The work would give you time in the field with a professional as well as any experience with the equipment or technique that the professor may be using.

3. Do a summer field internship:

Whether you are working through an REU program or volunteering for a drilling company, any field-based experience that you would gain would be more than you could ever get from a class. This is the best way to develop a sense of comfort in the

field while being around supportive people to guide you.

4. **Go on a geology vacation:**

Find an area that you would like to learn about geologically and go there. It would probably be best to do a little research on the area first so that you have an idea of what is going on geologically before you get there. I have found that I have learned more than I expected on geology trips where I can learn and have fun at the same time.

Since people learn best by doing, the more field experience you may have the better off you are. Extra field experience also can give you a boost when it comes to future opportunities. Future employers and graduate schools love to see field experience on your resumé or application. It shows that you have

an edge over someone else who may not have such skills. Professionals would rather work with someone who knows what they are doing than someone that still has to be trained or is uncomfortable in the field.

Finally, before you embark on your first field excursion, here is some advice. Invest in a good pair of comfortable waterproof field boots and some rain gear. If you ever get caught out in the field on a rainy day, you will be happy you made the purchase.

If you have any ideas, questions, or comments about this article, the upcoming article, or any other issues, please feel free to contact me via email at: small_fzzy_mamml@yahoo.com. Next article: Field work and the Student.

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