Bridging the Gap: Strengthening Education and Employment for Diverse Students

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Content:

When entering college, many students from minority and under-represented communities experience difficulty connecting with peers, faculty and others on campus. Oregon State University (OSU), like any other University, provides opportunities to make these connections. These efforts are largely coordinated at the University level and are commendable. However, they often lack the personal touch and have mixed success in creating a cohort of individuals within the natural resources related majors and others pursuing similar career goals. As a result, the College of Forestry (COF) has created its own program to foster an environment in which students feel comfortable, welcome, valued, and appreciated. COF at OSU has a new (three years old), highly successful, seemingly popular, and actively growing support program for under-represented undergraduate students in the College—we call it SEEDS (Strengthening Education and Employment for Diverse Students). Our primary focus is on students of color, many of whom are also female and first generational college students. We seek to support their academic and professional growth, and their transition to the working world (including graduate school and service). Our primary mechanisms include paid, mentored work experiences, academic and professional mentoring, and creating a strong social network within the COF and OSU. The COF community realizes that a key link to creating a welcoming environment are faculty members, but with class sizes sometimes numbering in the hundreds, faculty forging personal connections with each student through courses alone is unrealistic. Therefore, by providing support for faculty-mentor and student-protege work experiences, SEEDS bridges the gap between students and others in their academic community.

Developed in 2009-10 academic year, SEEDS currently serves 20-40 students per year. Initially funded with USDI Bureau of Land Management and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds via the Pacific Northwest Research Station of the USDA Forest Service, the program reaches out to underrepresented students in the COF. Specifically, there are two primary foci in the program:

- Creating a supportive environment for diversity students throughout their entire undergraduate career at the COF to increase retention;
- Developing pathways to career opportunities for diversity students through assisted mentorship, networking and hands-on experience.

SEEDS recognizes that diversity is important for the COF, and strives to attain it through attracting diverse audiences to careers in forestry and natural resources that in the long run will diversify the natural resources professions’ work force.
Since its inception, SEEDS has experienced many success stories. Regarding the paid, mentored work experiences that 12-17 students have participated in each year, a Latino SEEDS student, who wants to work in natural areas conservation, says: "Every day is a new learning experience, and I am given various different tasks that allow me to take part in different aspects of the recreation program". Another Latino SEEDS student who wants a career in wildlife management says: "It's not just another work experience. SEEDS program mentoring has helped me to be a much better student, and also so learn valuable hands-on jobs skills". SEEDS has also helped students to get acquainted with graduate school and the working world. Several other success stories will be shared during the presentation.

Although the SEEDS program is still young, it has already proven that through creating an atmosphere of support and providing mentorship to diverse students, it can achieve its goals of reaching, retaining, and supporting students during their undergraduate years in order to help them reach their full potential as forestry professionals.