How to Have a Successful

At universities around the World, A&WMA Student Chapters serve an important purpose in helping students become prepared for their professional careers. Active Student Chapters provide unique opportunities to students with an interest in environmental (and other) fields. Participation leads to interactions with local and regional environmental professionals, and provides hands-on experiences that promote student interactions and creative thinking—skills they will need as they enter the workplace.

The University of Montana A&WMA Student Chapter, which is part of the Pacific Northwest International Section (PNWIS), was formed in 2005. Since then, our Chapter has received numerous awards, including most recently the 2012 Willenberg–Hansen Moby Award presented at the Annual PNWIS Conference in Portland, OR. The Moby Award is the highest of three levels within the PNWIS Chapter recognition award program. In the following paragraphs, we describe how our Student Chapter has remained active throughout the years, engaging locally with the Montana Chapter, regionally with PNWIS, and nationally/internationally with A&WMA.

Member Involvement

Our Chapter typically is composed of 10–15 active graduate and undergraduate members at any given time, mostly from the departments of chemistry and toxicology. An important strategy to recruit new members is to maintain visibility on campus. In addition to “word-of-mouth” recruiting, we advertise campus-wide (i.e., posters and information stations) and to other student groups, who are most likely to be interested in environmental studies. To retain members, we have a Student Chapter meeting approximately every two months. As part of these meetings, we strive to create a mix of both exciting and educational activities tailored to our members’ interests. We have found that students are much more excited about getting off campus and interacting with the community than hosting a meeting on campus. Most importantly, keeping the experience lively and fun is the best way to keep members engaged. A constant challenge for any Student Chapter is the cost of membership. We have addressed this by working with the A&WMA Montana Chapter to cover the costs of student memberships, or receiving membership waivers through PNWIS for those students attending the annual conference.
A&WMA Student Chapter

Engaging Our Campus and Community

Our Chapter has made it a goal to make our presence known not only throughout campus, but within our community. One strategy we use is to maintain an updated Web site. Here, potential members or event participants can find information about our Chapter, as well as information on recent and future events. Pictures are a great way to advertise how we are involved in the community, and what types of activities our group participates in. Another way to get involved at the community level is to reach out to local environmental organizations. Our group has participated in several tours, including trips to local wastewater management complexes, mining and Superfund sites, and environmental restoration consultant groups. These types of field trip meetings give the students a chance to meet local environmental professionals involved in air and waste management, and develop and expand their professional network. In our experience, the environmental managers are more than happy to give tours to the students, and show off their facilities.

The Importance of Attending Technical Conferences

As a Student Chapter, we continually push for involvement with A&WMA at all levels. This includes participating in Student Chapter meetings and activities, regional meetings, and even national and special session meetings. These events provide excellent opportunities for student poster and platform presentations. However, the biggest hurdle for participating in these events is often cost. We have found that conferences will often work to accommodate students who wish to attend, especially those students that are interested in giving a presentation/poster, and/or wanting to volunteer as a session chair (or some other volunteer position).

In fall 2010, our Student Chapter hosted the PNWIS Annual Conference at the University of Montana. This was the first time that the PNWIS Conference had ever been held on a university campus. Our Student Chapter was integral to the success of this conference, and was very active in all phases of meeting planning. This included organizing the student and young professional activities, serving as session chairs, giving presentations, and organizing the technical tours. In September 2012, A&WMA held a Visibility Specialty Conference in nearby Whitefish, MT. Members of our Student Chapter were able to help with the poster session in exchange for admittance into the conference. We also received travel awards from the National Science Foundation to help offset travel expenses. Not only did we get to participate in the planning of a top-notch technical conference, we were able to expand our professional network.

Another great way for students to get more engaged with the conferences is to participate in the annual “Environmental Challenge” competition. Originating at the PNWIS Annual Conference, this competition gives student teams the opportunity to develop solutions to a mock environmental problem and then present their solutions to a panel of environmental professionals. It challenges students to promote innovative ideas and sell them to diverse stakeholders, played by role players (regional environmental professionals) at the conference. We have found that the Environmental Challenge can be an incentive that attracts new members to our Student Chapter.

Conclusion

Having an active and productive Student Chapter does not come easy. However, there is a direct relationship between the amount of effort you put into your Student Chapter, and the amount that you will benefit from your effort. Making your Chapter fun is critically important. In addition, taking advantage of opportunities such as engaging local environmental professionals or attending regional/national conferences is an important networking tool for students, who are looking for next steps not only in their education, but also their professional career. em

Student Corner is a bi-quarterly column written for (and by) student members and is sponsored by A&WMA’s Publications Committee. Have an idea for a topic or want to contribute a column? E-mail: studentcorner@awma.org.