

## **Professional Development Hampton Roads Trip Report**

Committee Co-Chairs: Emily Egginton Skeehan and William Goldsmith

Trip Leaders: Emily Egginton Skeehan and Sara Blachman

*On Wednesday August 13th, 8 VIMS students (Sara Blachman, Emily Egginton Skeehan, Julia Moriarty, Alex Renaud, Randolph Jones, Bruce Pfirrmann, Danial Wang, and Jessica Lisa) participated in the Graduate Student Association Professional Development Committee (PDC) professional development trip to Hampton Roads, VA. The itinerary consisted of five different stops that included meetings with individuals within the federal government, NGOs, nonprofits and the private sector. The following report consists of career and trip lessons learned by trip participants that we would like to share with the entire VIMS graduate student community.*

### **A. Key Lessons Learned**

Overall, a tremendous amount was learned regarding important skills for successfully joining the workforce, job-hunting tips, networking advice, and grant/fellowship application advice. Some key lessons that were highlighted by the individuals we met with include:

- GIS is a program that is used by marine professionals in every sector. Gaining familiarity with it is highly beneficial and an asset when promoting yourself to potential employers.
- When asked to describe essential skills required for their positions, nearly every professional emphasized public speaking and writing.
- Get your foot in the door by taking a position at the ground level and then work your way up. Specifically, the Army Corps of Engineers in Norfolk frequently hires from within their intern pool.
- Making scientific knowledge translatable to the general public is an important skill. If you are working to galvanize citizens to rally around a cause target them by telling them how your cause will positively affect their lives. When trying to get people to change their behavior, education is not enough. The obstacles that are preventing behavior change must be identified and removed. Incentives are also very effective tools.
- Make sure you enjoy what you do each day. Sometimes promotions in the private sector mean moving towards managerial roles. Don't let work tell you your goals.
- Nearly every organizations we spoke with discussed the challenge of coping with limited financial resources. The necessity of "doing more with less" and "being spread thin" (funding and staff) was a common theme in our conversations across both the private and public sectors and on the local, state, and federal level.
- Consequently, one of the skills stressed throughout our visit was the ability to successfully obtain funding and resources for projects and salaries, particularly through proposal and grant writing.

If you can find funding, then you can create a position at organization for which you want to work.

- Developing a network of contacts in your field can be useful when searching for a position. Many professionals we visited obtained their current positions, or started at their current organizations with the assistance, advice, and/or recommendation of a colleague, friend, mentor or other contact. There were also a number of professionals at The Army Corps that obtained their positions as a result of their internship with the organization.
- Applying for and obtaining jobs with the federal government requires time, flexibility, patience, persistence, and an understanding of how the process works. The Army Corps group provided several recommendations, especially on working with the USAjobs website.
- The day proved once again that in addition to having the skills to take advantage of opportunities, networking is key to getting lucky in the job world.

## **B. Meeting Minutes**

### **Lessons Learned:**

**Justine Woodward**, Environmental Engineer, Habitat Management Division at Virginia Marine Resources Commission, VIMS Alumni

- For the past three years, Justine has been involved in the VMRC's Habitat Management and Regulatory division. Prior to that she worked for their Fisheries Management division
  - She started at VIMS in 2005 working with Rom Lipcius of Fisheries, then switched to Mary Fabrizio/Rob Latour
  - She started at VMRC writing commercial harvest reports.
  - Once the Habitat Management position opened up, she switched over despite not having wetlands background.
- The Habitat Management division primarily acts as a clearinghouse for permits (ie. dredging, structures over the water, etc). They work with localities, DEQ, and the USACE and have regulatory control across the whole state, in non-tidal as well as tidal water bodies.
- Justine's job involves site inspections in the field in addition to desk- and paper-work. She is also responsible for presenting to the commission board as well, which she enjoys greatly.
- Required Skills and Qualifications for jobs such as hers at VMRC
  - Masters degrees are preferred
  - Experience dealing with the public & public speaking, as well as good writing skills, basic computer skills, and working knowledge of marine regulations are all important
  - Fisheries Management work requires specific analytical skills
- Job Search Advice
  - Keep options open, utilize stepping stone jobs, and a policy class can be very helpful.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District: **Kristen Scheler**, Environmental Scientist, Technical Support (environmental); **Faraz Ahmed**, Engineer; **Rachel Haug**, Project Planner; **Sage Joyce**, Regulatory (started as a student intern and now a DA intern); **Keith B. Lockwood**, MBA, LEED AP, FP-C, Chief, Technical Support Section; **Sharita**, an economist in Planning; **Steven Decker**, Regulatory; **Nicole**, Regulatory; **Janet Cody**, Planning Branch (started as a field technician); Dan Krenz(SP), DA Intern Program;

- The group provided useful advice on navigating USAJobs and applying for federal positions.
  - The Federal Pathways program provides intern positions for students and recent graduates to enter the federal system. Another possibility is the Presidential Management Fellowship. The internship process is a great way to get in and learn the job. Once inside the USACE, you can easily move around (positions and geographic location).
  - Apply early if possible, sometimes as much as a year in advance.
  - Become familiar with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) job series, numerical codes that designate different types of federal position. Searching for positions with the job series, as opposed to keywords, can return more results.
  - Do some research before applying, as position listings and descriptions are often vague. For instance, many of the biologists, ecologists and environmental scientists we spoke with have titles like Regulatory Specialist or Environmental Manager.
  - Know the position you are applying for. Some candidates are very well prepared for this and it reflects positively on them as a candidate.
  - Flexibility and the willingness to relocate is highly beneficial, particularly when searching for your first federal position.
  - Be honest, but as thorough as possible in completing the application and resume. The entire group stressed the same sentiment: “Don’t be modest”.
  - Review the job description and requirements closely to make sure you have the right documents and information submitted. You won’t be informed of what’s missing from an incomplete application, simply passed over and told that you do not qualify.
  - Always submit the cover letter as well. It’s optional, and many applicants do not.
  - Technical writing is an important skill for planning and project management professionals to possess.
  - Keep an eye on the USAJobs site weekly as postings can quickly change or disappear. They also mentioned OPM.gov for detailed descriptions of jobs.
  - Use the keywords that are in the job description in your cover letter and resume, even if it means writing out the names of classes you took. The first set of “eyes” looking at your application will belong to a computer.
- The USACE, and federal work generally, allow for a great work life balance, including schedule flexibility.

- Unlike other government entities the USACE essentially has clients
  - They can turn down projects when they don't have the capacity to finish the job.
- The Water Resource Division is made up of three different departments which require varying amounts of field versus desk work.
  - Regulatory
  - Planning
  - Operations which includes Technical support and Engineering
- There is a lot of red tape and redundant requirements so most jobs require a lot of learning as you go.
- Useful Skills and Qualifications for jobs at USACE
  - GIS (shifting away from AutoCAD towards ArcGIS for design)
  - Technical writing - writing to get funding, writing with a focused scope
  - Project management - having an idea of how you are going to get a project to completion
  - Accounting, finance, economics

Lynnhaven River NOW: **Karen Forget**, Executive Director; **Meredith Malone**, Restoration Projects Coordinator; **Laurie Sorabella**, Executive Director of Oyster Reef Keepers of Virginia, VIMS Alumni

- Organization Goals
  - Stormwater management
    - VA Beach has had a stormwater fee has been in place since 1992 to help mitigate nonpoint source nutrient loading.
  - Stewardship of lands & Habitat restoration
    - Restoring oyster reef & riparian habitats
    - Working with personal property owners
    - Organizing student & religious community programs
      - The PEARL school program work with teacher to organize plantings on school grounds, native species, oyster gardening
  - Creating conservation dialogue with city officials
- Organization Structure
  - There are about 10 full-time employees. The organization is governed by 9 different committees made up of local marine enthusiasts and experts. The committees provide operational and technical help.
- LRN has collected 8,000 members in 12 years of operation.
- It, like all non profits face big challenges. Their resources are stretched to the limit. Maintaining energy in the community and keeping up momentum can be harder than initially gathering it. There is always competition for funding.

- Grant writing is a beneficial skill. You can fund your own job with a successful grant. When writing the “broader impacts” section of a grant proposal it is important to focus on what people like. For example, focus on oysters instead of fecal coliform.

**John Galler, PhD, Former Consultant and now a science teacher at Norfolk Academy, VIMS Alumni**

- His undergrad (W&M Alumni) major was in Geology and ES which led him to get Milliman as his adviser and then to pursue a masters at VIMS with Milliman.
- This opportunity led to field research in China, which turned into connections with the Navy. His interests and research work got him a job with the Office of Naval Research. He recommends finding out who are the original funders of your research and hitting them up for jobs.
- Went to Tulane for his PhD and following that did some work with Shell and oil related consulting firms. He moved around a bit in the consulting world, and worked for Tetra Tech for 10 years.
- In the fall he will start to teach 6th grade science at Norfolk Academy.
- He suggests that as you get promoted in consulting you will continually move towards management and away from technical work.
- He advises to not let work tell you your goals and that it’s a very small community out there.
- He recommended we check out CH2MILL for science jobs and management track jobs.
- He introduced us to a new acronym, STEAM (STEM plus Arts).

**Emily Steinhilber, Executive Director, Virginia Coastal Coalition**

● The VCC works with companies to get them to acknowledge and think about sea-level rise

Emily Steinhilber recently joined the Virginia Coastal Coalition as Executive Director and looks forward to developing the organization and being a part of creating a vibrant economically and environmentally sustainable Hampton Roads region. She holds a B.A. in Economics from the University of Virginia (2007) and a Juris Doctor and Masters in Environmental Law and Policy from Vermont Law School (2012). Though Emily has experience ranging from securitization law, to small businesses, to local and federal government work, she has focused on environmental issues in business including environmental taxation, corporate environmental responsibility, and implications of sea-level rise to the private sector and municipalities. Through work with the Environmental Tax Policy Institute Emily presented research on subsidies to offshore wind investment at the 12th Global Conference on Environmental Taxation in Madrid. She currently resides Virginia Beach with her husband and their golden retriever.

**Mary-Carson Saunders Stiff, Consultant for the Virginia Coastal Policy Clinic at the College of William & Mary Law School**

Mary-Carson Saunders Stiff, J.D., C.F.M. Mary-Carson graduated from William & Mary Law School in 2013. She is a Consultant for the Virginia Coastal Policy Clinic at the William & Mary Law School. She also works as an Assistant Director for Wetlands Watch, a non-profit in Norfolk, on legal and policy issues related to sea level rise and changing coastlines. She previously worked for Virginia

Outdoors Foundation, the Land Trust Alliance, and Virginia Sea Grant. Before attending law school she worked at Episcopal High School as the Assistant Director of Annual Giving and novice girls' crew coach. She graduated from Bates College in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts in English.

### **Ben McFarlane, Regional Planner at Hampton Roads Planning District Commission**

Ben interned at VIMS before attending planning school. Here is his bio:

Mr. Benjamin J. McFarlane has been with the HRPDC since 2008, first as a Physical and Environmental Planner and currently as a Regional Planner. During his tenure he has worked on several major projects, including a plan for the Northwest River Watershed in Chesapeake, Virginia and the Hampton Roads Regional Green Infrastructure Plan. Mr. McFarlane also conducts regular research and analysis related to water quality issues, comprehensive and general land use planning, and climate change. Mr. McFarlane is the HRPDC's lead planner for its climate change efforts, which include internal research and planning, collaborating with outside investigators, and coordination, outreach, and education with localities and other stakeholders. He also helps coordinate several other regional programs and initiatives. Mr. McFarlane holds a B.A. in Economics and a Master of Urban and Environmental Planning from the University of Virginia. He is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners.

### **Jenny Tribo, Sr. Water Resources Planner, Hampton Roads Planning District Commission**

Jennifer Tribo is the Senior Water Resources Planner for the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission. She has been with the Commission since 2005. Ms. Triboprovides support to local government members through the stormwater and water quality programs. Ms. Tribo has a B.A. in Biology, Chemistry, and Environmental Studies from Drury University in Springfield, MO and a Master of Environment Management from Duke University. Prior to joining HRPDC, she worked for U.S. EPA Region 5.

**Jason** Barney, President of Barney Environmental Inc. and Chairman of the Board for Back Bay Restoration Foundation. He is also a volunteer with Lynnhaven River Now's Marsh Island Resiliency Task Force. Mr. Barney provides consulting and technical expertise, oversight, and management for all company projects. He has over 10 years of experience in environmental consulting and holds a Masters of Science degree in Environmental Science. Mr. Barney is a native of Virginia Beach and a graduate of the University of Virginia.

## **C. Student Feedback on Logistics**

**1. The mix of meetings on the itinerary included professionals from a variety of sectors and disciplines within the Hampton Roads marine science professional community.**

*Evaluation:*

- Yes. We spoke with a mix of professionals from private, public and non-profit organizations of varying sizes working at the local, state and federal level, often in collaboration (or competition). Their backgrounds, experiences, and current occupations ranged from pure science to law, planning and policy. Overall, this mix provided a wealth of information from a host of different, yet related, perspectives. ~Bruce

The mix of professionals and disciplines was great. I particularly enjoyed the perspective of individuals who had moved between sectors during their careers (e.g. Meredith Malone, John Galler). - Julia

- Yep. Got the whole NGO, state and fed government and some private views on things. Good summary of marine science related work that goes down in the region. -ADR

Yes. We met with a variety of professionals in government, private and non-profit sectors, all with very diverse backgrounds and career paths. ~Jess Lisa

- Yes. We met with professionals from non-profit organizations, state and federal government agencies, and private factors. ~Daniel

*Feedback:*

## **2. Professional hosts provided a satisfactory amount of unique information and advice specific to their positions and tailored to the VIMS students in the room**

*Evaluation:*

The professional hosts did provide a great amount of information and advice ranging from USAjobs tips to skills to focus on while in grad school to interviewing tips for consulting jobs. - Julia

Yes. They all were pretty good. Lynnhavenn River NOW may have been a little heavy on the what they're about over job advice etc originally, but headed a bit more in right direction by end. -ADR

The professionals often provided information specific to their organization. The advice they gave concerning the application process and desired skill sets for the various fields often overlapped, emphasizing the importance of particular skills such as communication and grant writing. ~Jess Lisa

Common skill sets mentioned by different professionals are writing, public speech, communication with public, and GIS. Also for me, it was very interesting to have a feel about how different types of organizations work in the states. ~Daniel

*Feedback:*

Some hosts had prepared materials ready, while others were more off-the-cuff. Perhaps it would be helpful to send an outline of some of the material we would like to go over prior to the day of the meetings so hosts can direct their efforts. -Randy

### **3. The itinerary, timing, and number of participants allowed the student group to arrive at meetings on time and represent VIMS well.**

#### *Evaluation:*

I think we were on time for every meeting. Even with the hitch at the USACoE security station, we were still on time. I liked the number of participants. It allowed for more personal interactions. I think adding a couple more students would be good, but not more than five or so. - Julia

Yep. Plenty of time to get through things and no worries there. In a perfect world it'd be nice to have the larger break later in day (ie lunch) to refresh brains instead of in morning, but with these kind of things you have to have to go with their schedules. ADR

The amount of time devoted to each group seemed appropriate, there were very few instances where we were rushed. ~Jess Lisa

Yeah. Great schedule. ~Daniel

#### *Feedback:*

The size of our own group of VIMS students was just about right (8 people). It allowed us to be on time (see above comments) and not overwhelm the hosts with our numbers and questions. -Randy

I agree, I think the group size was just right at 8. Any more people might have taken away from the interactions with the professionals. ~Jess Lisa

## **D. Next Steps**

Some ideas for future trips or site-visits:

- Richmond, for an in-depth look at state-level opportunities, positions, and issues. Possible sites could include the Department of Environmental Quality, Game and Inland Fisheries, the General Assembly (local legislators, committee meetings, staffers working on marine or environmental issues), or the Governor's office.
- Attending a local Wetlands Board meeting

- Attending a VMRC Commission Meeting, particularly if a contentious issue will be discussed (4th Tuesday of each month) -- The commission is made up of appointed prominent marine enthusiasts. They rule on disputed habitat and fisheries permits.
- A big conference that many VIMS people could go to interact with locals, marine professionals, and members of other graduate schools.
- VIMS alumni could speak on an education related panel:
  - Laurie Carroll Sorabella, Director of Oyster Reef Keepers of Virginia, Inc.
  - Bob Carroll teaches at the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program
  - Bethany Eden, Governors School
  - Paula Jasinski, a VIMS alum and founder of Chesapeake Environmental Communications.

To increase the possibility of successful site visits and professional trips in the future, it may be beneficial to write up a brief (1-2 page) protocol on the process of organizing and planning this particular trip. It could highlight items to keep in mind, draft emails to potential professionals, contacts from the previous year, and other necessary tasks (obtaining a van, VIMS-related paperwork, etc.)

Contacts we invited who were unable to attend:

Skip Stiles, Wetlands Watch

Shannon Hulst, Wetlands Watch

Clay Bernick, City of Virginia Beach

Shannon Davis, Back Bay Foundation

Christy Everett, Chesapeake Bay Foundation