

Little fish in a big sea: Creating academic-industry partnerships at a primarily undergraduate university in Texas Oil Country to further geoscience education

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Academic-industry collaborations play a crucial role in shaping the training of future geoscientists. Universities can be slow to adopt changes in curriculum and academic paradigms. Industry often is required to have a profit-oriented mentality, and research often cannot be created without extensive investment. Creating these partnerships holds immense value for both parties, but especially the students. These collaborations facilitate the exchange of novel ideas and expose students to cutting-edge techniques, practices, and perspectives that are often challenging to incorporate within a traditional classroom setting. These partnerships offer industry professionals the opportunity to directly engage with students, showcasing how their education can be applied in real-world contexts. Professionals can answer pressing questions on the “how” and “why” that otherwise would not be encouraged due to resource constraints.

Establishing collaborations can be challenging, particularly for smaller institutions and those primarily focused on undergraduate education. Nonetheless, these partnerships are vital for students. They contribute to equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to address pressing societal challenges, spanning from critical metal exploration to energy solutions and the discovery of new hydrocarbon resources. Stephen F. Austin State University is one such university, located in Deep East Texas, with a rich history in the Oil Patch. We are often overlooked for larger institutions when it comes to recruiting, such as our sister institutions in the University of Texas System. However being at a smaller institution comes with several benefits. Here, I will talk about the journey of exposing students to professionals, creating partnerships (and friendships along the way), and establishing a research program that can foster student learning while establishing exceptional research programs. I will talk about the mindset (mine and others at my university) that has allowed my research program to engage industry and especially alumni, the relationships established with our local geological societies to further help our students during times of uncertainty and financial crisis in higher education, and the benefits to all groups involved. Finally, I’ll talk about the journey of pushing the boundaries of research through these partnerships and the novel ideas that have come about.