Early Advising and Successful Transfer to Four-Year Degree Programs

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The Department of Geology at Portland State University offers B.S./B.A. in Geology and B.S./B.A in Earth Science. The B.S./B.A. in Geology is the program for students intending to practice as professional geologists. The B.S./B.A. in Earth Science is a supporting degree for other professions such as law, K-12 teaching, urban and regional planning. We offer minor programs in geology, environmental geology, space and planetary science, and computer applications with an emphasis in geosciences. Our undergraduate majors are dominated by transfer students from area community colleges and post baccalaureate students. Post bacc students take prerequisite math and chemistry courses at community colleges to reduce cost.

I am the undergraduate advisor for all undergraduate programs offered by the Department of Geology. Students, in general, do not understand how to navigate through the higher education system, have limited sense of career pathways, and limited understanding of the relation between the curriculum and progress toward degree completion. During advising sessions, I emphasize three anchor points to guide our conversation. The first, largely my responsibility, is to protect the integrity of our degree programs so that the degree they receive is respected. The second is estimating the length of time to degree. The third is exploring ways to contain cost to degree. The last two are student factors and I advise to shortest time and lowest cost. The shortest time is controlled by course work completed before transfer and how this academic preparation aligns with the flow of our degree programs. The lowest cost to degree depends on our ability to effectively utilize education resources in the community. A complicating factor related to our location is developing programs of study that utilize the lower division resources available at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington and the upper division resources at PSU to minimize out of state tuition costs. Cost often outweighs time to degree.

Early advising is critical! One hallmark of the faculty relationships has been identification of geology majors at the community colleges and early advising at the university several quarters before the time of transfer. These often pre-admission advising sessions familiarize students with the degree programs offered by PSU and explore alignment of completed and anticipated course work with the PSU curriculum. We also explore career interests and how minors, curriculum modifications (substitution of up to 8 credits of upper division chemistry, math, physics, biology, or engineering courses for geology courses), senior thesis and/or articulation with the University Honors Program, involvement in faculty research, and getting a job work together. By the end of this session, students have an individually tailored degree map that projects the term of degree completion and have a plan to contain costs. Students are encouraged to take advantage of dual-enrollment agreements between PSU and community colleges. The agreements allow students to take courses concurrently at both institutions and to count the total number of credits toward financial aid requirements. Grades appear on the transcript at both institutions each term. Faculty and administrators from our community college partners and PSU geology faculty meet annually to examine the learning experiences of students and alignment of programs.