
We recently convened a 2-day staff retreat to focus on quality improvement and the road ahead. We jump started the process by sharing the 2005 Stanford commencement address given by Apple CEO Steve Jobs in which he shared his personal insight into how dropping out of college and being terminated from his job led to positive life and career transformation.

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has varied and profound challenges ahead. We need to remain true to the notion that being hungry and foolish are indeed important. During our retreat I added an additional element to the mix—let’s be hungry and foolish together.

We have been blessed, as an outcome of hard work, long hours, and committed staff, to have bent the arc of our association and the profession toward greatness over the last year. Hyperbole, you say. Pride before the fall, you snigger. Let me shine a light on a few examples. Hopefully you’ll have better insight into the spirit of my statements. NEHA desires to be an essential partner and the most influential voice in the environmental health profession. We can achieve that by being respected thought leaders. We can achieve that by providing you with the tools and resources needed to be effective. We can achieve that by projecting leadership in professional circles where decisions are made that affect our profession and the health of the nation.

First, let’s examine thought leadership. For many years, federal agencies and other associations were the go-to resource for information about the environmental health profession. How many environmental health professionals work in the U.S.? What are their professional needs? What degrees do they have? How do they receive continuing professional education? How are services delivered?

NEHA staff and its partners have three peer-reviewed publications planned for the next year intended to answer those questions. One of those publications, crafted in partnership with the de Beaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, will share data and insights as an outcome of the Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS). This publication will provide a top-down perspective, mostly from senior and state level professionals.

The second publication, conducted in collaboration with Baylor University, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) National Center for Environmental Health, and NEHA staff, will share findings from our own efforts. Most of you are familiar with this work as many of you participated in this study—Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH). Focus groups and surveys have been conducted with representative boots-on-the-ground environmental health professionals to gain perspective into the needs of the profession from the bottom up. This research promises to shine a light on the expressed needs of you, the individual practitioner. It will also describe workforce characteristics, who you are, your sex, age, etc.

Finally, NEHA staff has been working with a University of Colorado School of Public Health intern to collect national environmental health service delivery system-level information. How are environmental health services delivered? Where is the administrative home for governmental environmental health services in each state and territory? How many states are governed by home rule and how many are centrally managed?

While we are working on describing our profession, we have also been burning the midnight oil to ensure we have a sustainable pool of resources aimed at building your professional capacity. This endeavor is most notably evident in providing tools and resources that assist you in advancing your work. In this case, we have some remarkable successes to report.

NEHA has been entrusted with a multimillion-dollar federal award to rebuild environmental health in the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as smaller and more targeted projects in Puerto Rico. By the time you read this column, the work will be well underway. We feel privileged to be part of the solution for the
environmental health network in the Caribbean. You will be hearing more about this project in the future.

We are also delighted to report that we have recently been awarded a 5-year cooperative agreement to build the capacity of the national environmental health workforce. The activities under this award will vary from year to year. In the first year, we will receive support for climate and health, informatics, and Health in All Policies, among others. This grant in many respects places us at the center of the public health conversation, as many other major associations have been part of this funding mechanism for several years. As a side note, we received backhanded praise for our application. After the award was made, someone called me to inquire who we hired to write our grant as it was so well crafted. For the record, we wrote it ourselves, though it was burnished by input from some of our friends.

Finally, we have had success in getting environmental health to the table where decisions are made that influence our profession and our work. We have been strategically identifying opportunities for NEHA members and staff to represent us on federal advisory committees, panels of influencers, and in key federal testimony. We have nominated individuals for Board of Scientific Counselors for CDC’s National Center for Environmental Health and National Center for Emerging Zoonotic and Infectious Diseases, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine’s Environmental Health Matters Initiative. We have been invited to speak on environmental health workforce development at the World Health Organization and to deliver keynote addresses to our counterpart associations all around the world.

Yes, together we have accomplished a lot. What got us here is us. Every NEHA staff member is an essential contributor to our success. I mean that. Our bench is sparse, so in many cases there are no reserves, only starters. Many NEHA members have stepped up to contribute to the association’s success in countless ways over the last year—as committee members, abstract and article reviewers, local affiliate leaders, and many other largely anonymous contributions. In this month of Thanksgiving, whoever you are, I thank you. It’s making a difference. The evidence is all around us.

I close by asking a favor. While we can and should enjoy and celebrate the milestones described in this column, now is not the time for complacency. Now is not the time for ego. Now is not the time for crowing. Now is the time to be thankful for each other and to steel ourselves for the challenges ahead as they are many and complex. I take solace in knowing it’s you that protects my family when we eat out, recreate at the beach, or drink water from the tap. For my part, I intend to stay hungry, and thankfully, foolishness comes naturally.

ddyjack@neha.org
Twitter: @DTDyjack

Employers increasingly require a professional credential to verify that you are qualified and trained to perform your job duties. Credentials improve the visibility and credibility of our profession and they can result in raises or promotions for the holder. For 80 years, NEHA has fostered dedication, competency, and capability through professional credentialing. We provide a path to those who want to challenge themselves and keep learning every day. Earning a credential is a personal commitment to excellence and achievement.

Learn more at neha.org/professional-development/credentials.

A credential today can improve all your tomorrows.