

PRESS RELEASE

Southwest Texas Junior College

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GeoFORCE Texas looking for young geoscientists

(For immediate release)

Plans were unveiled in Austin recently for “GeoFORCE Texas,” a new initiative aimed at finding prospective geoscientists among current Southwest Texas eighth graders.

Patterned after a similar program at Fort Valley State University in Georgia and sponsored by Shell Oil Company with support from ConocoPhillips, GeoFORCE Texas hopes to expose students to the geosciences in ways that inspire and motivate them to actively pursue geology as a future course of study.

“This program aligns well with our workforce development initiative, aimed at cultivating prospective engineers and geoscientists to ensure our industry has the skilled workforce required for the future,” said Ronnie Kurtin, director of corporate human resources for Shell Oil Company.

Through weeklong summer academies that include geology-based field trips, research projects and coursework led by university professors, students will be introduced to fascinating geological issues they generally don’t have the opportunity to study in their normal academic courses.

Students currently in eighth grade who meet program academic and social conduct guidelines are eligible to apply.

Introducing the program

Teachers and administrators from school districts in the Southwest Texas Junior College 11-county service area were guests of the John A. and Katherine G. Jackson School of Geosciences at the University of Texas at Austin for a two-day informational workshop about the new program.

Officials with UT’s Jackson School have been working with representatives of Southwest Texas Junior College to identify middle school and high school science teachers, as well as school administrators, to help with recruiting efforts.

Citing statistics from the American Association of Petroleum Geologists (AAPG), Jackson School Associate Director Doug Ratcliff told educators attending the Feb. 2-3 meeting that the number of geologists has declined significantly over the past 20 years and is rapidly aging.

“Total membership in the AAPG is down 29% since 1985 and the number of members under the age of 45 has dropped 17% since 1980,” Ratcliff said. “Bottom line is that our industry needs some new blood and we need your help in recruiting students into a program we believe will get them excited about geology.”

Ratcliff noted that when junior high students list a profession they are interested in it is usually “doctor or lawyer, certainly not geologist, and we need to change that.”

GeoFORCE Texas hopes to increase awareness of geology and related fields through a series of summer academies for qualified eighth graders.

“We think we have created a program that will open young students’ eyes to the many exciting career opportunities available to geoscientists,” Ratcliff told the group.

A total of 35 students will be selected from all applicants for the first academy scheduled this summer from July 17 through July 29. Preference will be given female and minority applicants, two groups that are significantly under-represented among current geologists. There is no cost to students who are selected for the program.

The itinerary for the first summer academy calls for students to begin with three days on the UT Austin campus for classes and tours of local geological sites, followed by a trip to the U.S. Geological Survey headquarters in Reston, Va., and additional field trips to various geological sites and national park facilities across New Mexico.

Students selected for the program will be required to commit to four years of attendance at GeoFORCE summer academies.

Application deadline is March 18 and a committee made up of staff from the University of Texas at Austin and Southwest Texas Junior College will select program participants. Selected applicants will be notified in writing by April 18.

Extending opportunities and forging partnerships

In addition to announcing the GeoFORCE Texas Program, representatives of Southwest Texas Junior College also outlined plans to continue to expand math, science and engineering offerings.

“We hope to work out an agreement soon with UT for a joint degree plan between our institutions for students interested in pursuing bachelor’s degrees in the geosciences,” SWTJC Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dick Whipple said.

According to Whipple, SWTJC has similar joint degree plan agreements with Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Sul Ross State University and the University of Texas at San Antonio, in a variety of fields.

“It is basically a co-degree plan that the student, SWTJC and the university all sign off on,” Whipple said. “These agreements give students a clear understanding of degree requirements and eliminate any confusion about courses that will transfer.”

SWTJC Dean of Technology and Institutional Advancement Blaine Bennett also spoke at the Austin meeting.

“Thanks to the Jackson School of Geosciences, students in our service area are being afforded a tremendous opportunity,” Bennett told teachers and administrators. “I hope you are as excited about this program as we are and will go home and encourage your students to apply.”

Bennett said he was excited about the opportunity GeoFORCE Texas will provide SWTJC to expand its course offerings to accommodate needs of future geoscience majors.

“Through various programs offered through NASA, the Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation, SWTJC has been actively expanding our math, science, computer science and engineering programs over the past six years,” Bennett said. “GeoFORCE Texas offers us another opportunity to expand our curriculum to meet the needs of our students.”

Applications and more information about the program can be obtained by contacting Dick Whipple, SWTJC director of curriculum and instruction, at (830) 591-7326, or Julie Spink, development specialist with the Jackson School of Geosciences, at (512) 471-4360.