Where Is the Youth in AAPG?: Discussion

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Bear (1973) raised valid and disturbing questions. Under the head “Where is the youth in AAPG?,” he first discussed a more general question—namely, why more able young graduates do not go into petroleum geology. Having taught petroleum geology for 21 years in a university that has furnished its share of geologists to the oil industry, I find myself in disagreement with several of Bear’s statements and conclusions.

Whether today’s senior students are less motivated than their predecessors is a matter of opinion. Bear says they seem to be. But the seniors who enter our department for graduate work today are at least as capable and serious as in the past, if indeed not more so. I have no idea as to the basis for Bear’s statement that academicians have “demoted” the physical sciences in recent years. In the large and fairly representative institution where I teach, the physical sciences have had excellent support, at least up to the present moment of governmental cutbacks in research funds. We hardly have suffered in comparison with the biologic sciences, let alone with the social sciences or the humanities.

As to the charge that professors routinely steer their better students into research and teaching and away from petroleum geology, this is an old accusation that has had a lot of mileage put on it. It has a certain appeal because it implies conspiracy: you can get sore at a whole group, the professors, for being so prejudiced and unfair. In my experience, however, the charge just plain is not true. Most of today’s graduate students are fairly mature people; we generally tend to help them go into any specialty in which they are interested and good. I have never known a professor deliberately to discourage a good student from going into petroleum geology. (On the other hand, it is sometimes advisable to discourage a poor one from trying.) Last autumn, five major companies sent interviewers to our department; every appointment schedule was filled. Several of the men and women expecting to go into petroleum geology are the full equals in ability of their fellow students who look toward teaching or research. Critics of university departments well might talk to a few company interviewers before making broad unsubstantiated statements about the departments’ shortcomings and the dirty work that professors do.

Another fault of “faculty members in the geology departments of large universities” is that they are environmentalists and encourage students in this direction. My experience is that today’s students are environmentalists before they ever get into our sinister clutches. They have not been brainwashed; but from reading, and especially from their own observation, they have become convinced that this is a small planet and that we had better be careful what we do to it. They think this way because it is the wave of the future, and young people definitely are future oriented. That is where they are going to live, after all. Bear’s contemptuous reference to “so-called protectors of our world and nature” is just the sort of remark that turns students off.

I agree with Bear that young practicing petroleum geologists should become members of AAPG; once in the profession, they should join the professional society. To search the AAPG directory in vain for the name of a person who you know works for an oil company makes you wonder about that person’s commitment to his vocation. I do not know what the answer to this is, except maybe that the oil man’s usual reflex—blaming the professors—is no more applicable here than in the other situations that Bear discusses.

REFERENCE CITED
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