

## **Professional Development Opportunities Abound: *With a Special Focus on Virginia Tech's Executive Master of Natural Resources (XMNR) Leadership for Sustainability Program***

*Provided by Kelly Mattingly, Town of Blacksburg Director of Public Works and Chair, Chapter's Sustainability Committee*

It has never been easier to stay abreast of the latest industry trends and develop your professional knowledge and skills. We are being bombarded with opportunities to advance our knowledge and connect with our peers via webinars, lunch & learns, live workshops, seminars, tours, socials, and conferences. In addition, Chapter members will soon be hearing about an exciting opportunity to participate in an APWA Public Works Institute right here in the mid-Atlantic region through a partnership with Virginia Tech's Office of Continuing and Professional Education. At the national level, the APWA Donald C. Stone Center for Leadership Excellence in Public Works offers professional development and certification opportunities for current and future Public Works leaders.<sup>1</sup> There are also online graduate degree program opportunities tailored to Public Works professionals available through the Norwich University and the University of Nebraska.<sup>2</sup>

Graduate degree programs certainly require a higher level of commitment and it's a particular challenge taking this on while already trying to balance work and home life responsibilities. However, this should not dissuade anyone from taking on the challenge of graduate school. We've all heard the adage, "if you love your job, then it's not work". Well the same could be said about graduate school. If you are passionate about the material being studied, graduate "work" can be an exciting and rewarding experience.

My passion is sustainability and a few years ago I was searching for a graduate program that focused on both sustainability and leadership, and one that could be accomplished without interfering with my work and home life. I found it in Virginia Tech's *Executive Master of Natural Resources (XMNR)*<sup>3</sup> in *Leadership for Sustainability* program. The XMNR is an accelerated graduate degree program specifically designed for working professionals. It's a 14-month program that begins every January, meeting one weekend each month at the Virginia Tech Research Center in Arlington, Virginia. The cohort consists of about 30 students divided into teams of 4 or 5 students each. The program consists of coursework, an international residency, and a capstone project. While the program content focuses on sustainability, it also embraces key leadership skills. "The curriculum emphasizes executive qualifications and leadership skills identified by public and private sector employers, including interpersonal and organizational communication; financial, information, and technology management; program evaluation and policymaking; partnerships, team building, and conflict resolution; and entrepreneurship, innovation, and resilience," says Program Director Dr. David Robertson.

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<sup>1</sup> APWA Donald C. Stone Center for Leadership Excellence in Public Works, <http://www.apwa.net/donald-c-stone>

<sup>2</sup> Graduate Studies for Public Works Professionals, <http://www.apwa.net/learn/Graduate-Studies/Norwich-University>

<sup>3</sup> Executive Master of Natural Resources (XMNR) Program, <http://cligs.vt.edu/xmnr>

What appealed to me was the broad range of sustainability topics covered, the quality of the educators, and the manner in which the information was delivered. Topics ranged from organizational sustainability plans; regional challenges faced by communities within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed; local, regional and national issues associated with climate change; Asian dam construction project transnational issues and impacts; genetically modified organisms (GMOs); and the issues and impacts of rainforest deforestation. The faculty members were experts in their field and they fostered an atmosphere where much of the learning came during facilitated discussions within the cohort. The adjoining image shows the XMNR 2013 cohort students working on the Chesapeake Bay Project.



The coursework structure was also a very welcome departure from the lecture-notes-test model I experienced as an undergraduate. Seminar speakers, research papers, individual projects, online activities, team projects, and field trips kept it interesting and relevant. And of course, the 10-day



international residency was a pretty awesome experience. The 2103 cohort went to China where we split our time between addressing a critical eutrophication problem at Lake Erhai in the Yunnan Province and travelling to multiple cities throughout China to see first-hand the environmental and social issues we read and hear about in the news. The above image shows XMNR 2013 cohort students at Lake Erhai, China meeting with a local wastewater treatment plant technician.

Professional development can make your job a little easier, a little more enjoyable, and it can help you find that other job you've always dreamed of. So wherever your interest lies, there are professional development opportunities out there waiting for you, no matter where you are on the corporate ladder and no matter how old you are. Have a passion, make a plan, and have fun along the way.

Anyone interested in discussing continued education, you may contact Kelly Mattingly, Committee Chair, at [kmattingly@blacksburg.gov](mailto:kmattingly@blacksburg.gov).