

Phil Stokes

Executive Director at Penn Dixie Fossil Park & Nature Reserve



What is your current occupation?

As Executive Director at Penn Dixie Fossil Park & Nature Reserve, my responsibilities are: Day-to-day administration of small nonprofit/nongovernmental organization focused on science education and tourism, managing professional staff, budgeting and financial duties, grant writing, fundraising, technical writing, writing for broader public audiences, public speaking, correspondence, advocacy with elected officials and local government, park maintenance, marketing, human resources, site security, construction planning, merchandise ordering, website design and tech-related tasks, graphic design, networking, working with board of directors, cleaning bathrooms, literally anything and everything that needs to be done.

What is your educational background?

Ph.D., Geosciences with Minor in Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies, University of Arizona, 2016. Dissertation entitled 'Diversity in Geoscience: Critical Incidents and Factors Affecting Choice of Major' (Karl W. Flessa & Kristin S. Gunckel, Co-advisors).

M.S., Geological Sciences, University at Buffalo, 2007. Thesis entitled 'Ground penetrating radar investigation of the Late Quaternary Hiscock Site, western New York State' (Gregory S. Baker and Jason P. Briner, Co-advisors).

B.S., Geological Sciences, University at Buffalo, 2004.

A key message for students is that the geoscience workforce is dynamic, and boundaries between sectors and occupations are fluid. How has this been true in your career?

During my MS degree, I engaged in community education and outreach while managing a NSF-funded diversity program. I supervised a large number of high school and college students while they interned in various labs and organizations in our community. Two of our favorite locations for community programming were the Buffalo Museum of Science and a fledgling nonprofit fossil park that occupied a former cement quarry just south of Buffalo, NY.

Finding geophysical work both challenging and fulfilling, I continued to challenge myself with a PhD at one of the top universities for geosciences. Part way through my program, I decided to transfer to a new program and advisor, ending my geophysical work and focusing on science education. In particular, I began a dual program which combined geosciences with social and behavioral sciences. I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do when I graduated, so I tried a bunch of stuff – teaching, research, managing students, and advising. I also had the opportunity to work with industry groups, local schools, and various university departments. And, I served as a staff member on a geology field camp for 12 seasons. I also had the opportunity to travel and do research across the U.S. It was all very interesting and each experience provided valuable insights into potential career areas. Working with a broad spectrum of people while learning how to complete a wide range of tasks later proved invaluable.

While wrapping up my degree, I set a goal of applying to one job each day. I set aside an hour each night to do so. Out of roughly 100 applications, I'd say that 10 actually replied back to me one way or another. In summer 2015 I was a finalist for a prestigious, well-paying gig at a top national research lab in one of my dream cities. After several rounds of interviews, I went home thinking I had a good chance of getting the job. However, it was not meant to be.

A few days after the big rejection I received an unexpected, mass email from the fledgling fossil park that our outreach group had partnered with a decade earlier. The original executive director was retiring and they were in search of someone to lead the organization into the next phase. Up to that point, I had really only considered a career in academia or with the usual research centers and national organizations. To that point I had not seen myself managing a small nonprofit. And, I certainly did not expect to return to my home region of Western New York.

I applied for the job. After three months, two interviews, and cross-country travel, I was offered the position. Despite my unfamiliarity with nonprofit leadership, much of my prior work experiences prepared me for the challenges to come. I'd say that each of my previous jobs had lessons that were directly useful in handling the problems of running an organization on a daily basis. Perhaps the most important lesson was to be pragmatic – to accept that change is inevitable and success hinges on how we navigate uncertainty. The ups and downs of my career shaped my approach to leadership. I learned to be flexible; to be accountable to rely on instincts when analytical decision-making is inconclusive; to not take things personally; to avoid toxic people; to set a high standard for myself and others; and to be grateful for people who are compassionate and understanding.

Where do you see your sector moving in future years? How would you advise students to prepare to be competitive job applicants and successful employees?

Museums, science centers, and nonprofit organizations as a whole are not going anywhere. However, the success of any organization depends on how it prepares for the future and handles challenges. A failing organization blames outside factors (economy, labor force, lack of interest) while it slowly decays and funding disappears. Conversely, a growing organization always focuses inward and continuously seeks to improve in all regards.

I feel the same is true for job applicants. Successful candidates are persistent and take advantage of opportunities for personal and professional growth. While no one can deny that the job market is a tough place, the best candidates make themselves apparent by any means necessary.

Similarly, successful employees are always interested in improving their work. They make an honest effort to understand the bigger picture of what is at stake when they are doing their jobs. They take the time to do each job the right way, even if it means doing extra work at their own expense. They are dependable, passionate, and model professional behaviors to their coworkers. They don't complain about things outside of their control and are quick to offer praise to others instead of demanding recognition for themselves. They are the ultimate team players.

What is the role of networking in your sector? Do you have advice for a student who is just beginning to build their network? What is the best way for students to get their foot in the door?

Networking is critical. I'd say the best advice is to get out there and be yourself! Attend conferences and trade shows. Kick back at the bar with professionals from companies you might want to work for. Do internships and volunteer for community groups with your free time. People appreciate honesty and also the vulnerability that comes with being human. Learn to be a good listener rather than a good talker. Introverts: get out of your comfort zone!

I've found that the most impressive folks are the most modest. They are competent – of course – but the true value they add is a positive attitude with a spirit of teamwork. These are the ones that get job offers.

What does a “typical” day of work look like for you?

There is really no typical day. This past week I attended political functions, met with community leaders, drove a sick employee home, fixed our website, performed an accounting review, examined plans for a construction project, handled customer inquiries, hired two new employees, dealt with a human resources issue, purchased supplies, wrote checks to vendors, juggled payroll, performed an insurance audit, performed maintenance work on site, and sent far too many emails. Oh, and spreadsheets!

What is the best part of your job?

One perk of nonprofit management is the opportunity to go behind the scenes at other organizations. I'm blessed have many wonderful community partners, and we try to help each other out however we can. I thoroughly enjoy touring museums and other cultural organizations while sharing anecdotes and stories with their leadership. And, I don't have to pay admission!

Do you have any other comments or advice for students looking to enter your sector of the geoscience workforce?

Diversify your thinking as well as your skillset. In the nonprofit world, we serve the whole community. If you see yourself first as a certain type of person (ideology, political party affiliation) you are not going to get along with others. A broad worldview – a truly objective outlook on life and humanity – will go much farther than a narrow mindset.

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