

# **Spencer Klinefelter**

Education Coordinator at the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History



## **What is your current occupation?**

I am an Education Coordinator at the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History. My job responsibilities include managing and scheduling all K-12 school programs at the museum, which include onsite and offsite field trips at various locations around the county. I create and implement professional development programs for K-12 teachers across Santa Cruz County, and assist our public programs department in leading guided walks, workshops, and presentations for the public. I also assist in our exhibit design and grant-writing processes, and manage two education assistants who help lead our school programs. The overall mission of the museum is to connect people to nature and science to inspire stewardship of the natural world, and we really emphasize the many ways that science plays a role in our daily lives and how all people engage in scientific practices on some level.

## **What is your educational background?**

I have a bachelor's degree in Environmental Studies from UCSC with an emphasis in interpretation, and a minor in education. In my last two years of undergrad I completed and obtained certification from the California Naturalist Program and am a current Wilderness First Responder, as well as credentialed substitute teacher. This combination of experiences provide a foundation for my current work leading environmental education programs for children and adults out in natural spaces.

**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?**

I have been involved in outdoor, environmental education in some way for the past eleven years, first as a camp counselor, then as an after-school program coordinator and now in my current capacity at the museum, where I've been for the past four years. But my role and responsibilities as an educator necessarily bring me into contact with people active in land management and research of all kinds. Our work isn't confined to classroom education, our service learning and stewardship program with high school students involves us working with city, county, and state parks, the UCSC Natural Reserve System, Groundswell Ecology, and numerous other entities engaged in work that might not be traditionally considered as education.

In terms of the work evolving over time, there has certainly been a shift in museums broadly and science education institutions more specifically. Emphasizing culturally responsive teaching practices, multimodal exhibits and programs, and social-emotional learning has catalyzed major shifts in how we think about and design experiences for students and the broader public.

**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 have a complicated history, and the vast majority are bound up in the project of colonialism. There is a concerted effort from many institutions like ours to confront that past, learn from it, and create more welcoming spaces that represent the local community. Institutions that tell stories of traditionally marginalized people need to take a critical look at how those stories are being told, and who is involved in their telling. Community-sourced exhibits and reaching out to collaborate with partners, whether they're local tribes, land trusts, scientists, or other nonprofits, is more important than ever.

Students: intern! There are plenty of opportunities for paid internships, and plenty of unpaid ones as well. Keep an eye out and get some experience, even if it's somewhat tangential to your current goals, you can usually find ways to connect different kinds of work and the skills that work needs to another position you are interested in. And don't be afraid to both present your own ideas as an intern or new employee, and ask for ideas from colleagues and supervisors, that means you're active and interested in the work at hand.

**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?**

There is a lot of collaboration between and amongst different organizations such as museums and science education nonprofits. Working or interning for one organization, there is a good chance you may meet folks from different organizations, and typically if there are openings somewhere else, you'll be notified about them. Regionally this sector has a few listservs that act as open forums for when a position needs to get filled or an opportunity to collaborate arises. Finally, just to emphasize again: look for internships! They are the easiest and usually shortest-term way to try something out and see how you feel about it.

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

In a normal school year every morning Tuesday through Friday is spent teaching a program either onsite at the museum or out in the field somewhere. Afternoons are a mix of different tasks; scheduling new programs for later in the school year, creating science curriculum, planning for an upcoming workshop or public event or new exhibit, or checking in with colleagues. The routine of morning programs is offset by a high degree of variation and flexibility in afternoon tasks.

**What is the best part of your job?**

The amount of time I get to spend outside and the sheer diversity of tasks and projects I am involved in. I thrive on being a generalist, and while there's plenty to be said for specialization, many positions will invariably require a broad set of skills. I love that I can lead a program for a fourth grade class out in the redwoods in the morning, then help to plan a day of ecological restoration work with high school students and participate in meetings focused on writing grants or professional development with other educators.

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

There are typically a lot of part-time positions (~10-20 hours a week) available in this sector, most of them paid. If you have the time, apply for some and try it out! Plenty of part-time positions can eventually yield a full-time position at the same organization if you like it.