

Lessons Not Learned at University #1

Do you ever ponder that the lessons you learned at university as an undergraduate are not sufficient for you to succeed in forestry? Have you learned lessons since graduating?

This is the first of a series of short anecdotes with a simple lesson about some aspect of forest resource planning. To avoid embarrassment I have generally used *nom de plumes*.

The subjects will vary but reflect my resource planning background. They will include some statistical “lessons” because they were an essential part of my forestry education and, as everyone knows, the average forester hates statistics with a passion.

Hanging a gate

An old-guard forester apparently used to give any young graduate starting work under him the task of re-hanging a gate that was falling off its hinges so that they would understand that there was more to forestry than they had been taught at university.

Fortunately I had spent my University vacations working in various forest gangs and had at least partially learnt that lesson already. I knew that if I was to succeed I needed to add to my formal tertiary education by learning from salt-of-the-earth forest workers.

A few years later I was back at University. An *Experienced Graduate* had been invited to the University to deliver some guest lectures. He had provided a problem for students to resolve -

A newly graduated forester starting his first day’s work, managing a roading crew responsible for building culverts. The crew was run by a very experienced foreman who assigned the tasks. The crew were an archetypal forest crew of the 1950s and 1960s, they were basically a dysfunctional crew. There were different ethnic backgrounds and one man’s country had just declared war on another’s. Some of the men were alcoholics, some had long term injuries that had to be accommodated, some were involved with other men’s wives. The crew worked effectively simply because of the management skills of the foreman.

This day the foreman called in sick and the young forester had to quickly assess the crew, understand the various interactions, decide what needed to be done, assign jobs and get the crew to work.

The undergraduate students were asked how they would approach the challenge. Who would they get to work with whom, and doing what, and why?

I was in that euphemistically named Staff Tea Room, where everyone drank coffee, and in came someone with a copy of the problem. He rhetorically asked with a smirk on his face “how can any university allow such a stupid thing to be presented as part of our curriculum”. There were general murmuring and mutterings of accord.

Then before I could think of what to say, or whether to say anything at all, a *Wise Senior Lecturer* who had started his professional life working with an inventory crew in the field, responded “How, you ask? Well, if the new graduate cannot resolve that sort of issue in his first few days on the job then his professional career will be scarred, possibly for years, possibly for life.” He then went on to give some examples from his own experience. The others in the tea room were suitably chastened.

Many experienced foresters will understand that this is an allegory for the sort of issue that new graduates need to be able to handle early in their professional career, either with forestry crews or contractors. Effectively addressing awkward practical and interpersonal issues is an essential part of a forester’s work.

Lesson: There is more to forest management than can be taught at university and there are some things that are better taught and learned on the job. Can a university help a young graduate manage their entry into the professional work force? Should they? Working during undergraduate vacations can help but this learning needs to go on all through a professional career.

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