

SLEWS Program Mentor Manual

Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship

Introduction

The success of the SLEWS program is based equally on the quality of the restoration projects and the experience of the students. Mentors play a key role in achieving that success by ensuring project quality, making personal connections with students, co-facilitating field days and maintaining SLEWS Program culture. This manual lays out some useful guidelines and tools to make new and continuing mentors feel more comfortable with these responsibilities.

Quality Control

Hands-on experience on a restoration project is the cornerstone of the SLEWS experience. Mentors help the SLEWS program meet its goals by ensuring the quality of both the restoration work and the student experience. Making the field days engaging, rewarding, and effective on the ground is key to both of these pieces.

Making field days fun – It is important to work hard, but also to have a good time. There are many ways to engage students but here are a few:

- **Joke** with them while you work. It's important to model how you can be productive and have fun.
- **Create games** to make the work exciting.
- **Suggest activities** for students who seem unengaged. For example if a student seems bored or is wandering off you might say "Hey Joe, can you help me bust out these last couple plugs?"

Making projects matter - Students need to feel that their work is important so that the project is rewarding. Here are a few strategies:

- Share your **knowledge**. For example if you know a lot of cool facts about plants, but don't share them, it's a missed opportunity.
- Students want to know what **impact** they are having. Why are these plants good? What is this place going to look like in 5,10, 20 years?

Making lasting change – The work students do must be effective on the ground for the overall project to be a success. Here are some strategies for maintaining project quality:

- **Go back** and look at your group's work soon after you start. For example, if you notice that they are planting them too high, you have the chance to stop them and say, "Hey guys, remember to dig those deep enough," or "Do we want the plant under, over, or at the level of the ground?"
- Help them to **create roles** for themselves to make the work more efficient. On grass planting days it can help to have "the dibbler", "the planter," etc. Challenge them to figure out the best way to go about their task.

Personal Connections

Making personal connections with the students is vital to the experience of both students and mentors. Each mentor will have their own style of interacting with the students; some will be silly, some shy. The students will recognize and appreciate your attempts to connect with them regardless of your style. There are many ways to make these connections; here are a few:

- **Consistently attending** field days is easily the most important. If you're not there, you cannot connect. We realize that many mentors will have full and sometimes conflicting schedules. It is your responsibility to make sure you set aside your field days in advance, and that you commit to being at each field day for your site.
- Make it a goal to have a **personal interaction** with every student, every field day. This can be anything from a friendly smile, to a conversation while working or during lunch. We encourage you to look for every opportunity to connect with the students personally. This, I would argue, is what keeps them (and you) coming back.
- **Talk to them** candidly about their lives. Check in with how things are going, what they think of the food, games, the work, etc.
- **Share your story**. How you got interested in this field, did you go to college, what your job is, etc.

Co-Facilitation

As a mentor you are also helping to make sure that the field days run smoothly. This includes communication, being aware of the agenda and facilitating activities.

- Frequent and effective **communication** is essential for a successful SLEWS project. Communicating can alleviate a lot of field day stresses for you and us. For example: we can help you prepare for your role at the field day, and you can help us by letting us know in advance if you can't make it. We'll let

you know in advance if dates need to change and we'll try to find a new date that works for everyone on the site team. If you forget when your field days are, you can always call Sydney (209-480-9227).

- Being **attentive** to the flow of the field day is very important. It is important to participate in all the activities, but the needs of the day take precedence. For example; if another mentor is leading an activity before lunch, you may need to remove yourself from the activity to go set lunch up.
- There will be times when mentors are asked to **facilitate** certain activities. Utilizing visual aids and asking the students questions, are effective methods for informally teaching in the context of the field day. We'll try to give you both background material and lead-time so that you can feel prepared for your role.
- As a mentor, we want you to help us meet the **reflection** objectives of the SLEWS program. The reflection time is an opportunity for students to digest all the information they've been exposed to at the field day, take a keep-sake home with them, and express themselves in ways that they may not be used to or comfortable with. This means that just as mentors lead by example during the fieldwork, they lead by example during the journaling, and sharing just as the students do. This is another time when it is so important that you are willing to go out of your comfort zone. Journaling is often the least "cool" activity, and for students to see their leaders not shying away from the task is reassuring to them. Remember that it's good to feel like you can admit to not knowing all the answers, or being able to do all of the activities like a professional, the students respect that and it will make them feel more comfortable because they know we're all on the same page. Lastly, we will provide a journal for you, but if you have one that you keep already, feel free to bring it out.
- **Opening and closing circle activities** "break the ice" and provide closure for the SLEWS field days while facilitating learning, social bonding and personal growth opportunities as well. Just as with the work and the journals, these activities take everyone's participation. We will try to provide you with a description of these activities ahead of time.

Maintaining SLEWS Culture

In some ways the most important job you have as a mentor, and perhaps the most difficult, is helping to create and maintain a culture for the SLEWS field days that is inclusive of all people, positive, creative, energetic, committed, reflective and fun. This begins with the orientation and ends with the Stewardship Celebration. There are innumerable ways to create and maintain this culture, but here are a few ideas:

- **Modeling behaviors** is perhaps the simplest thing you can do. If you want to see inclusiveness, behave inclusively. If you want to see effort, work hard yourself. If you want the students to have fun, act silly and have fun. The field

day is, in some ways, a kind of performance. For everything you do, the manner in which you do it counts.

- **Participate** in all the activities. If students see you journaling, they'll want to journal. If they see you being silly during an ice-breaker, they'll feel more free to do the same.
- Enforcing the **“SLEWS Norms.”** At the beginning of the school year, even before the orientation, we introduce the following four norms, or normal behaviors, for how we try to relate to each other on SLEWS field days.
 - Respect each other and the land
 - Participate in all activities
 - Observe the etiquette of the Circle
 - Have fun

When you feel that any of these norms has been violated, it is up to you to call attention *to the behavior* and remind the student or students responsible why the norms are important and how his/her/their behavior is unacceptable.

- **Adaptation** is another important aspect of the SLEWS culture. The program has evolved and improved over years because we have tirelessly asked ourselves the question: “What worked well and how could we have done this better?” We will ask you to help us assess the program by participating in a brief (5-10 minute) “plus/delta” debrief with the staff and partners immediately following each field day. You will also be invited to attend evaluation meetings and to complete formal evaluations at the end of the school year.

In Closing

Hopefully this document has given you a sense of how paramount the role of mentors is in maintaining a successful SLEWS Program. We honor you in your willingness to support local habitat restoration and youth education efforts. If there is anything else we can do to further support you in this important role, please don't hesitate to contact your SLEWS Program Coordinator, Sydney Smith-Ransom, at 209-480-9227, or sydney@landbasedlearning.org