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## **\$40K grant for Prescott College to pay for examination of declining field study prospects for college students**

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The National Science Foundation wants to find out why students don't have as many possibilities to acquire field research studies in recent years. The NSF awarded Prescott College a \$40,000 grant to look into the rapid national decline in opportunities for students to have field experiences while training for work as biological researchers.

"Prescott College is at one end of the spectrum - it has the most robust field study of its size in the United States," said Tom Fleischner, Natural History Institute director and Prescott College faculty member.

The grant will help pay for a two-phase workshop titled "Proactive Strategies for Essential Training for the Next Generation of Biological Researchers," in which a select group of participants will participate in an intensive three-and-a-half-day gathering in Prescott, a white paper, and a published journal article.

The workshop, scheduled for the first week of March 2016, will include between 12 and 15 people from inside and outside of academia. Fleischner said he already has begun sending out invitations and every person invited so far has accepted.

"The situation is that it's become harder and harder for faculty to take students into the world. It's become notoriously difficult to get students a connection with real landscapes," he said.

The workshop will investigate the specific obstacles that have discouraged institutions from supporting field studies, and outline strategies to overcome these obstacles. The research will go into a white paper to be widely distributed to academic institutions and museums.

In the second phase of the workshop, a number of members from the original group will gather a second time to write an article for a high profile journal.

"At the very time our society struggles to adapt to changing climate, respond to loss of biodiversity, and respond effectively to other environmental challenges, the next generations of scientists are increasingly excluded from the primary laboratory [the natural environment] for understanding these issues," Fleischner said.

Field education provides foundational learning for several key biological science disciplines including ecology, systematics, biodiversity studies, and conservation biology. Many Prescott College students begin their field experience with a three-week wilderness orientation course.

The regular academic curriculum also includes field studies within the realms of each program. Public policy courses, for example, may have students interviewing people on both sides of the border with

Mexico, Fleischner said. He has taken Prescott College students on field trips to Kino Bay, Mexico, the islands off California and Maine, and Alaska. Students also have studied in Norway, Costa Rica and at a field station in Kenya.

"Field education - studying real plants, animals and landscapes - provides foundational learning for biologists. But educational opportunities for field study have decreased dramatically in the past couple decades," Fleischner said. "It's been a slowly growing crisis that must be addressed in American higher education."

Prescott College and the NSF anticipate completing this project by the summer of 2016. They feel it has the potential for far-reaching and critical impacts on biological sciences training throughout the U.S., supporting a renaissance of field study opportunities for our next generation of scientists.

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