

# Future mining execs debate community rights

*Editor's note: The following article focuses on mining's impact on the communities in which it operates, and how mining colleges such as the University of Nevada, Reno Mackay School of Mining — perhaps more than any similar institution in the country — are teaching tomorrow's mining executives how to be more community oriented.*

By **PAUL BUGALA**  
Special to the Mining Quarterly

Record prices for scarce resources such as gold have mining companies hunting for minerals in places they hardly considered before. In these places, the industry often finds indigenous peoples, who previously gave little thought to mining in their communities.

What follows are often awkward, sometimes contentious, encounters between people from different worlds. When negotiations go well, there's a commitment to fairness and respect for basic rights that establishes trust between a community and a mining company. But when the process unravels, distrust can lead to a stalemate, or worse, violence.

During a two-week tour through American mining schools this March, I talked with some of the people who will be dealing with these issues directly. Students at the Colorado School of Mines, Montana Tech, the University of Utah, and the University of Nevada, Reno, told me that even before they graduate and begin their careers, they think about how they can help balance the priorities of the mining industry with the rights of affected communities.

"I feel that with knowledge and initiative we can take the bad reputa-

tion and unacceptable methods used by mining companies and turn them into positive things," said Robert Edwards, a mining engineering and Spanish student at the University of Utah. "Changes need to be made."

As the Extractive Industries Organizer at Oxfam America, it was clear that visiting these schools would be a great way to bring up the concept of community rights as part of mining curricula, an idea we first explored last fall. In October, Oxfam took indigenous leaders and partners from Guatemala, Bolivia, and the United States on a tour of mining schools. They talked to students, faculty, and administrators about how extracting minerals such as gold affects people, animals, and the environment.

After the tour, one of the nation's top mining schools, the Colorado School of Mines, announced it would develop a course for mining students that will analyze social and community issues related to mining. Oxfam responded to this opportunity by encouraging other schools to do the same. We created CHANGE Mining, an offshoot of Oxfam America's successful CHANGE program, which teaches college students how to become social justice activists on their own campuses.

Through CHANGE Mining, we will train mining students to advocate for undergraduate instruction about the impacts of large-scale mining on surrounding communities. The training will begin in Boston, where CHANGE Mining students will learn about Oxfam America and indigenous peoples. Then they'll take a series of distance learning sessions with mining and

advocacy experts. With that preparation, we hope that these students can then provide technical assistance in communities and return to tell their campuses about the experience.

To promote the program, I scheduled meetings with faculty and students at mining schools around the country. During our talks, students

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**Mike Nelson**  
University of Utah

asked questions that touched on some of the thorniest issues facing the industry:

- How should mining companies determine which community members should provide consent?
- What is the role of local and national governments in resolving conflicts between companies and communities?
- How can companies involve communities effectively in monitoring social and environmental impacts?

These are the right questions to ask. Unfortunately, many mining students aren't receiving enough training to answer them. Only the University of Nevada, Reno, Mackay School of Mining includes a class in its core curriculum that addresses the social impacts of mining. The

Colorado School of Mines' new class on these issues is offered as an elective. And at the moment, schools like Montana Tech and University of Utah don't offer any comparable classes on these issues.

Instead, students who graduate from widely respected programs are forced to find answers to the tough questions on their own in a setting where peoples' lives are at stake. There's a history of conflict between the mining industry and communities in places such as West Papua and Buyat Bay, Indonesia and Cajamarca, Peru.

Thankfully, as I thumb through CHANGE Training applications, I'm pleased to see that several students from the schools I visited have decided to make communities a priority in their careers. I'm hoping their involvement with Oxfam will help change how universities teach the issues.

From what I hear, some schools already have the right conversations going.

"I believe that it is of utmost importance for new mining engineers to enter the profession with a good understanding of the issues of sustainability, environmental compliance, and social responsibility," said Mike Nelson, associate professor of mining engineering at the University of Utah.

"As a result of the Oxfam visits to our department, we are examining the creation of a new course that will directly address sustainability and social responsibility in resource development."

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