

Elaine Smid

Job title: Volcanologist, University of Auckland

Can you tell us a little bit about your job?

I am a volcanologist who studies volcanoes in New Zealand. I do research for and help manage the Determining Volcanic Risk in Auckland (DEVORA) project at the University of Auckland. The city of Auckland is built on a dormant volcanic field—an eruption could happen at any time – so my project aims to figure out what may happen in the next eruption and to prepare for it by using our research findings to improve government policy and emergency preparedness plans.



How did you start on your path to a career in STEM and what did that path look like?

I am a perfect example that you do *not* have to know what you want to do early in life, and that you can switch careers and majors and still come out okay.

I started out as an environmental engineering major in college at the University of Virginia. I picked the major purely because I thought I'd be cleaning up the environment and I'd heard that engineers make a decent salary. After a year, I switched to an environmental science major because I didn't feel that engineering was the right fit for me. I was a bit lost at that point, but luckily I took a geology course as a part of my new major, and fell completely in love with the subject.

I took a summer internship at a geotechnical consultancy and liked it. I knew I'd have to have an advanced degree in geology to have a career doing it, so I applied for my master's degree in geology and got into the University of Hawaii at Manoa. That changed my life—it was there that I learned how to do real geology research, particularly on volcanoes.

What would you say to young folks who are thinking about a career in STEM?

As my career path has shown, you do not *have* to know what you want to do very early on. Take time to explore your interests. Developing a wide range of skills is really important. Don't just study your main subject; keep an open mind about where you may end up. Take the hard classes—believe me, learning them on your own later is ten times more difficult, and later you will be chosen for jobs over other people who did not take those hard classes. Making connections and getting some experience are also key.

Have more questions about Elaine's work? Feel free to contact her:

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