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Unique UNH-NASA Program Launches Students To International Science Meeting

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DURHAM, N.H. -- The University of New Hampshire's signature Research & Discover program is a "pipeline of opportunities" for talented science students looking for a strong bridge between their undergraduate and graduate years.

That the pipeline is working effectively is made clear by the fact that every year a growing number of R&D interns and fellows participate in the prestigious annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union, which begins today in San Francisco.

This year is no exception with a record-setting twelve graduate and undergraduate R&D students presenting their research findings alongside some 15,000 scientists who gather from around the world to share the latest research in the Earth and space sciences.

"To have students presenting at AGU is testament to the fact that they are doing significant scientific research," says ecologist George Hurtt of the UNH Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space (EOS) and the UNH department of natural resources and the Environment. Hurtt directs the R&D program, which began seven years ago as a collaborative venture between UNH and NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center.

Among the twelve R&D students is UNH graduate student Katelyn Ann Dolan, who will give an oral presentation on her research using satellite technology to evaluate large-scale forest disturbance wrought by Hurricane Katrina, which downed enough trees to release approximately 105 million metric tons of carbon to the atmosphere over time. Only small subsets of AGU presentations are given an oral format.

"I am excited to be presenting an oral presentation at AGU knowing that my research topic is of great interest currently," says Dolan, whose work could potentially have a bearing on NASA's Deformation, Ecosystem Structure and Dynamics of Ice (DESDynI) satellite currently in the planning stages. She adds, "It is a feeling of both excitement but also responsibility. I'm eager to get questions and comments about my research from the wide pool of scientists who attend this meeting and who may help steer the direction I take over the next year."

Research & Discover begins with an intensive 10-week, class-free research internship at UNH for rising college seniors and is followed by a second summer internship at the Goddard Space Flight Facility - the nation's largest Earth science research enterprise.

Franco Einaudi directs Goddard's Earth sciences division, which provides the NASA funding for Research & Discover. "We should all be very proud of this effort to attract the best and the brightest in this area of science," Einaudi says.

Qualifying students - who come from a variety of colleges and universities including Dartmouth, UC Berkeley, Cornell, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Duke, Bryn Mawr, and UNH - can

then transition from the internship program to a two-year, full-time, graduate fellowship to either continue their research or branch into a new topic area.

Second-year UNH graduate student Mimi Szeto, who will give a poster presentation on her work in ocean optics, says her R&D tenure has helped launch her research career without the struggles often encountered between undergraduate and graduate pursuits.

"R&D has been possibly the best academic program I've come across," Szeto says. "It has given me the rare opportunity to be fully funded for my master's thesis and has provided many field and travel opportunities."

In addition to Dolan and Szeto, poster presentations on a wide range of research across disciplines will be given by R&D students Virginia Sawyer, Jordan Goodrich, Haley Wicklein, Michael Wiener, Emily Glick, Genevieve Noyce, Andrew Maher, Claire Plagge, Jennifer Wurtzel, and Erica Lindgren.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a New England liberal arts college and a major research university with a strong focus on undergraduate-oriented research. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.