

Three UA Navajo Students Selected for NASA Space Grant Internships

The students will be mentored by UA faculty with similar interests for a year's worth of scientific research training.

By Rebecca Ruiz-McGill, University Communications
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Three University of Arizona Navajo students have been selected for internships under the 2008-2009 NASA Space Grant Undergraduate Research Internship Program.

A NASA Space Grant Undergraduate Research Internship provides students with an opportunity for paid experience in mentored research, research and development, science writing, science policy or science education.

"The goal of the program is to integrate research with education to help build a diverse, scientifically literate citizenry and a well-prepared science, engineering and technology work force," said Susan Brew, NASA Space Grant and Arizona Space Grant Consortium program manager.

The U.S. Congress established the Space Grant program in 1988 in large part to encourage more, and a larger variety of, students to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Arizona works to fulfill this mission by actively recruiting students from all majors as well as students who are traditionally underrepresented in these fields.



Jennifer Stanley, a senior majoring in agriculture technology management, is one of three Navajo students awarded a NASA 2008-2009 Space Grant Undergraduate Research Internship

Erin Boyd, Adriana Riggs and Jennifer Stanley, all members of the Navajo Nation, had similar anxieties about entering the UA community but overcame tough first semesters away from home to excel and serve as campus leaders.

Boyd, a senior natural resources major who transferred to the UA from Diné College her junior year, wants to make an impact on the Navajo Reservation when she graduates.

"My family has a farm on the reservation; my grandmother has sheep and cows. Free-grazing has degraded the land. We need people with experience in land management. I like that this degree and research opportunity will allow me to get outside and visibly gauge the impact the work is having," Boyd said.

Riggs, a junior pursuing a mathematics degree, worked at the Native American Student Affairs Office as a student employee and is currently a resident assistant. Growing up on the Navajo Reservation, Riggs said she always wanted to work for NASA and

figured a math degree would give her the opportunity to fulfill that dream.

"I spent my first semester secluded in my room but I started taking advantage of UA programs offered like the First Year Scholars, becoming an aide and now a mentor to help other students by pushing them to expand their world," Riggs said.

Stanley, a senior majoring in agriculture technology management, has worked as a student employee at the Native American Student Affairs Office and the UA Office of Arid Land Studies providing Web support. Like Riggs, she credits the UA recruitment and retention programs – New Start and First Year's Scholars – for part of her success.

In addition, the students cite the support from Native American Student Affairs or, as they call it, the University's other NASA, and the confidence instilled by the recruitment efforts of Barron Orr, who is the associate director of the Arizona Remote Sensing Center as well as associate director of the UA's NASA Space Grant program.

Orr is enthusiastic about the UA Space Grant program and is constantly on the lookout recruiting talented students to apply for internships. For instance, Orr recruited Stanley and Riggs after watching them take personal initiative, putting together a highly professional and yet impromptu welcome for a group of Diné College students.

Orr heard of Boyd through a colleague and convinced her to apply for the internship grant. Orr's colleague told him of Boyd's drive, commitment and enthusiasm for work and school.

"I am always looking for potential recruits. The NASA Space Grant is a competitive internship. It can be intimidating putting yourself out there but the opportunity for growth is tremendous, even for students who may not know for sure what they want to be," Orr said. "The process of applying alone helps future members of our work force formulate and articulate their ideas and interests as part of their effort to develop a plan for their future."

In addition, Orr said he wants students to know that many factors other than GPA are



Adriana Riggs, a junior pursuing a mathematics degree, is one of three Navajo students awarded a NASA 2008-2009 Space Grant Undergraduate Research Internship.

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considered in the review process.

The experience begins when the interns are paired with mentors – ideally with similar research interests – who have been drawn from UA faculty as well as government or nonprofit or even industry affiliates. The mentor and the student then set out to define the context of the problem at hand, which includes posing questions, defining the methods to address them, conducting analyses, and interpreting results.

The experience ends with a formal presentation of findings during the Annual Statewide Space Grant Symposium involving interns from colleges across Arizona.

Boyd and Stanley will be paired with Orr as their mentor, working on science translation and NASA Earth science technology transfer. Riggs will be paired with Richard Greenburg, a planetary scientist, on research involving the topography of Europa, one of Jupiter's moons.

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