

UCSC Astronomy Department Voted Best in Nation

An out-of-this-world department at UC Santa Cruz gains more national recognition from NASA study

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Campus News Reporter

Light-years ahead of the competition, the UC Santa Cruz astronomy department was ranked No. 1 in the nation this month, after a study conducted by NASA scientist Anne Kinney.

Kinney, the head of the Solar System Exploration Division, conducted the survey by evaluating how many UCSC faculty members' articles have been published and the number of times they were cited by fellow astronomers.

"It's wonderful news," said UCSC Chancellor George Blumenthal, who served as a professor of astronomy and astrophysics for over 30 years. "But it wasn't a total surprise. I was pleasantly surprised that it ranked so highly for all three categories of the survey. That's what is really impressive."

This mentality is a common response in the astronomy and astrophysics department. After all, before UCSC even existed, its founding faculty was already leading the field.

Astronomy and astrophysics professor David Koo told the story of the Lick Observatory at Mt. Hamilton, which was built by a quirky millionaire in the late 1800s. The observatory has been home to world-renowned researchers from various institutes since its conception.

They formed the UCO (University of California Observatory), a multi-campus research unit.

When Santa Cruz was founded in 1964, it became the new headquarters for the UCO-Lick faculty, thus Santa Cruz became the astronomy headquarters for the entire state.

"It was an outstanding department when the campus formed, with the Lick Observatory scientists," Blumenthal said. "After a few years they realized they lacked a theoretical department. They got a grant and hired five. I was the last of the five — this was in the '70s."



Otivia Irvin | CHP

The UC Santa Cruz astronomy department, which includes Chancellor George Blumenthal, has had a history of success in its field.

The Natural Science Foundation and other funds allowed these additions, creating the program that exists today.

Speaking from his office overflowing with reference books, charts and papers bearing complicated calculations, Koo said that it is not surprising that UCSC ranks so high.

UCSC scientists have had enormous involvement with the Hubble Space Telescope and the Keck telescope in Hawaii.

"But we are very good by a number of factors [other than article references]," Koo said. "We have a high number of National Academy of Science members. We have top-class, nationally famous astronomers."

One serious advantage of this new ranking is its ability to woo graduate students.

"It starts innocently enough — people have heard of you, and they want to join your department," said Sandra Faber, chair of the astronomy and astrophysics department.

The courtship of graduate students has become a very competitive practice, particularly between UCSC and its rivals. Of about 150 applicants, 20 are accepted, but these 20 are often also accepted at schools like Harvard and Princeton.

"They travel like a flock of geese for three days in early March, looking at the department," Faber said. "We entertain them; we take them to the beach."

One element of the

department's success is the respect the professors hold for each other. Rather than being competitive, "We are mutually supportive of each other," Blumenthal said. "This has been the case since I got here. But I have seen other departments that are dysfunctional, they just hate each other."

With professors collaborating on projects like DEIMOS (Deep Extragalactic Imaging Multi-Object Spectrograph), which uses the Keck telescope to find very faint galaxy spectra, spearheaded by Faber, Koo and Puragra Guhathakurta, it would be counterproductive to act any other way.

"People tell us, they note what a congenial department we have," Koo said. "We support each other, we are happy for each other, we never steal resources."

With new projects in the works, including the possibility of a powerful 30-meter telescope being built, astronomers are observing extrasolar planets — planets in solar systems outside of our own.

"This provides a channel for UC, to give it more visibility. It will be a wonderful bridge to potential donors," Koo said. "So it will be good for everyone, from students getting more scholarships to building more facilities. If several departments are top-notch, it helps others too. In a rising tide, all boats go up."

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News Briefs

Campus tree-sit could see resolution in near future



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The UC Santa Cruz tree-sit, one of the more heated ongoing controversies on campus, may be in its last stages as both sides appear to be "seeking mediated resolution" to the conflict, according to an e-mail sent to the campus by David Kliger, campus provost and executive vice chancellor.

"University of California, Santa Cruz and the Science Hill Tree Sitters announced Tuesday that they are seeking a mediated resolution to the 13-month protest. Both parties are hoping to reach a voluntary peaceful end to the protest before winter break," the e-mail said.

The tree-sit began just over a year ago during a Nov. 7, 2007 protest, when demonstrators clashed with police on the site of a proposed Biomedical Sciences Facility. The tree-sit resembled a similar sit at UC Berkeley near Memorial Stadium, which ended in September after 21 months.

"Participating in their discussions seemed both reasonable and potentially productive," campus spokesperson Jim Burns said. "We have consistently said we prefer a voluntary and peaceful resolution. It's our desire to give the talks every chance of success."

And as far as the future of the facility, "We have consistently said we need to build the Biomedical Sciences Facility," he said, "and that has not changed." 🐼

Madrigal edges out Terrazas for fourth City Council seat

The race for Santa Cruz City Council, which has flip-flopped since election day, is finally over. Tony Madrigal, one of two incumbents running for re-election, secured the fourth spot on the council after a month of uncertainty. Madrigal and fellow candidate David Terrazas finished just nine votes apart on Nov. 4, while several thousand mail-in and provisional ballots still uncounted.

Madrigal rejoins incumbent Mayor Ryan Coonerty and former mayors Don Lane and Katherine Beiers on the council, as well as Cynthia Mathews, Lynn Robinson and Mike Rotkin, whose terms end in 2010.

Terrazas, a first-time candidate for City Council, currently serves on the city's Transportation Commission. Though at times the updated counts showed him beating out Madrigal for the fourth spot, the final count listed him losing by just 45 votes, 11,365 to 11,325. 🐼