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Thursday, May 28, 2015

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OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD PROGRAM FOCUSES ON LANDING KIDS IN IDAHO

(BOISE) -- Select high school students from across Idaho have earned a chance to visit the NASA Ames Research Center in Sunnyvale, Calif., this summer, part of the Idaho Science and Aerospace Scholars program of the State Department of Education.

Their visits will coincide with the NASA center's management of the New Horizons spacecraft mission flyby of the dwarf planet Pluto in mid-July, giving the Idaho students a chance to see interplanetary history being made.

It's the culmination of an effort by approximately 130 juniors who signed up this year to take part in the competitive Aerospace Scholars program, which allows them to take an on-line NASA-developed course on space exploration, offered by the State Department through the Idaho Digital Learning Academy. The course teaches a broad range of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) -- but it's a class about space that's firmly grounded in Idaho.

The program seeks to capture the imagination of students and there is an emphasis on reaching out to rural schools. "In some of the smaller districts, there may be just a handful of students, or maybe only one, with a love of astronomy or space," said Peter Kavouras, who directs the Aerospace Scholars effort for the State Department of Education. "By partnering with the Idaho Digital Learning Academy, along with Idaho business and industry, we can offer a program that can inspire them and give them a chance to decide how to focus their classes in their senior year, or when they head to college."

Based on their course performance, a select group of 88 students and 10 volunteer teacher/mentors will be invited to participate in one of two week-long summer academies at Boise State University, in the middle of which they will take a trip to the NASA Ames Research Center on July 14-15 or July 28-29. During the academy week the students will break into teams to plan a simulated human mission to Mars and will get to meet researchers doing that type of planning and research in the real world.

All of the Aerospace Scholar program participants and their families also have the opportunity to take part in a series of regional Capstone Celebrations that offer interactive, hands-on Idaho-based STEM activities, along with tours of various facilities, labs and sites that showcase Idaho's STEM resources and career opportunities. "It's a core NASA program, but we infuse it with an Idaho emphasis," said Kavouras.

Between the research laboratories at each of the state's three universities, to private industry such as Micron and Hewlett-Packard, to the Idaho National Laboratory based out of Idaho Falls, "Idaho has a lot to offer in the way of STEM careers for our students," Kavouras said. "We do things that will encourage our students to stay in Idaho." The Capstone Celebrations offer a chance to see first-hand some real-world applications of STEM in the Gem State.

--More--



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The Capstone Celebrations will be held Monday, June 8, at the INL's Center for Advanced Energy Studies in Idaho Falls, Tuesday, June 23, at the University of Idaho in Moscow, and Tuesday, June 16, at Gowen Field in Boise. The INL and U of I sessions focus on their research labs, while the Gowen Field session gives students a chance to see air traffic controllers and meteorologists in action. "Each offers a unique look at what they do with STEM," Kavouras said, "and for the kids who couldn't attend the academics, we wanted to be able to give them a chance, in each region, for some hands-on experiences."

The Idaho effort arose out of the NASA High School Aerospace Scholars program in Texas, created 14 years ago in partnership with the Johnson Space Center. It was followed by a similar program in Virginia, partnering with NASA Langley, and then one in Washington state that partnered with a major NASA contractor, Boeing.

Idaho didn't have a direct NASA company or facility to serve as a partner, but that didn't stop Idaho's most famous teacher, former astronaut and current Boise State University Distinguished Educator in Residence Barbara Morgan, from putting together a meeting in May 2009 with representatives of the Virginia and Texas programs, as well as key Idaho stakeholders, the governor's office and the superintendent of public instruction, to explore creating a similar program here.

"The question she asked was, 'why not Idaho?'" Kavouras said. "We didn't have a NASA facility here, but the committee (formed to explore the idea and led by the State Department of Education) went looking for partnerships -- groups like the Discovery Center, the INL, Micron, Hewlett-Packard, our three universities and the Idaho National Guard, who offered all kinds of help, including in-kind support." By fall of that year, less than four months later, the first Idaho Aerospace Scholars program was launched. Idaho remains one of only four states in the nation to have such a program in place for its students.

Kavouras said the Science and Aerospace Scholars program has the support of business and industry. "They see it as a wonderful program to expose students to what Idaho has to offer. For example we took student scholars on a tour of Micron and Hewlett-Packard and they got to talk to employees and find out what they studied in college and where.

"This year is our first (college) graduating class" of the original 2009-2010 group of students who took part in the first Aerospace Scholars program, Kavouras said. "We know one student from 2012 is at Boise State University studying mechanical engineering with an internship at HP this summer, one from 2011 is at the U.S. Air Force Academy and one from 2010 has earned a degree in aerospace engineering from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland -- and interned with NASA Langley last summer."

"It was a remarkable experience," one student from last year's program wrote. "Not everybody gets to interact with astronauts and NASA scientists and engineers. The Academy was definitely inspiring. It really made me want to pursue a career in engineering. That's something that not many programs can offer today. (It) was definitely one of the best experiences I have ever had."

Applications for next year's Science and Aerospace Scholars program will be available after the start of school this fall. Watch the State Department of Education website at <http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/science/ISAS/> or contact your school counselor for more information.

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