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Student Researchers Prepare to Display Research at Contra Costa Science and Engineering Fair

Antioch, March 19, 2006:

Student astronomy researchers are about to present the results of their work at the brand-new Contra Costa Science and Engineering Fair in Concord, California later this month.

The new fair splits off Contra Costa County from the Bay Area Science Fair. Students from Contra Costa had to travel all the way to San Francisco to compete in past years. "This makes the fair more accessible to us in East County especially," said teacher Jeff Adkins. Adkins teaches Physics and Astronomy at Deer Valley High School in Antioch, California.

Several of Adkins' students are entering the fair this year. Student researchers are reporting on everything from minute changes detected in a distant quasar as seen by a space probe, to gender bias seen in students' views of astronomers. "Our students pursue original primary research as a scientist does, designing procedures, collecting and analyzing their own data, with my role reduced to that of an advisor and source of information," said Adkins.

One of the students participating this year is senior Brielle Hinckley, who took on the task of "reducing," or analyzing, the data from pictures taken by NASA's Spitzer Infrared Space Telescope last year while she was a junior. "It's one of the hardest things I've ever done," she said. "I can't believe it's almost done." Hinckley even went to Pasadena to Cal Tech's Spitzer Science Center to learn how to reduce the data. Not only that, but she has traveled to Kitt Peak Arizona to use a large telescope there in support of her research.

In contrast senior Anne Nguyen did a study on how early students begin forming opinions of what gender is most likely to be biased with respect to student's perceptions of scientists. She had students draw pictures of astronomers and determined that while equal numbers of girls see astronomers as either men or women, young boys saw astronomers almost exclusively as men. "Gender bias starts early," she said. Her original group was 4th graders, but now she is extending the work to lower and higher grades in an attempt to track bias as a function of time.

Other researchers include Crystal Ewen, who used a remote controlled telescope in New Mexico to detect matter falling into a black hole. Ewen believes she has evidence of seeing material fall in a distant black hole in another galaxy. "My results are statistically significant," she said. "I'm pretty sure something is happening here."

The Fair starts at the end of the month. The public can view the projects at Heald College in Concord on April 1 from 10 AM until noon.

Contra Costa County Science and Engineering Fair: <http://www.cceconptnr.org/ScienceFair/>

For more information, go to <http://www.ESPACEacademy.com> and click the Projects link.