

## **FVSU's Center for Biotechnology receives major NSF grant**

A \$322,000 grant awarded to Fort Valley State University will help budding scientists fulfill their dreams of pursuing careers in areas that lack professionals of color.

The funding from the National Science Foundation's BIO Directorate for Biological Sciences division will support the 10-week "Research Experience for Undergraduates Site: Summer Research Program in Biotechnology" for students attending FVSU and institutions across the nation, including schools in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"We don't have enough minorities in the fields of plant biotechnology and genomics. This program equips students with research skills that prepare them for graduate school and careers as researchers, scientists and educators," said Dr. Sarwan Dhir, a professor of plant biotechnology and the director of the Center for Biotechnology at FVSU, who submitted the grant proposal.

During the summer program, students stay on FVSU's campus and work with a faculty mentor to conduct research projects at the center. They also engage in a bi-weekly journal club, take field trips to major universities and attend seminars, all while earning \$460 per week.

From 2001 to 2008, NSF supported the program that had nearly 70 rising sophomores, juniors and seniors. By 2009, more than 62 participants earned degrees in biological sciences and more than 40 percent of the participants pursued graduate degrees at 12 institutions in 10 states.

"We're excited that our program is funded again for the next four years and we are certain that students will benefit," Dhir said.

During the proposal process, Dhir said FVSU's proposal was ranked in the top five percent of approximately 140 submissions, and viewed as a "model for what a successful REU program should be."

There are more than 125 REU sites across the nation. Students from other schools attend Fort Valley State and Dhir sends students to other institutions for summer research experiences.

"Dr Dhir's role in the NSF program goes beyond just managing his own REU at FVSU. The presence of FVSU undergrads at the other REU programs enriches the diversity of the other programs, as well offers exciting opportunities to the students," said Dr. Sally O'Connor, the cognizant program officer in charge of the REU program at NSF. "It's exciting to have the FVSU REU program among the REU sites funded by NSF BIO Directorate for Biological Sciences. Dr Dhir provides an exciting opportunity to undergraduates from across the nation as well as facilitates the inclusion of FVSU students in other NSF REU programs at major research institutions."

Katy Sanon is participating in the program at FVSU this year and enjoys it.

"The FVSU REU Biotechnology program is a great opportunity for me to gain research experience that I will be able to apply in my career as a scientist," said Sanon, a senior at the University of the Virgin Islands. "Not only is the FVSU REU biotechnology program educational, it's enjoyable. The campus is very beautiful, the labs are well equipped and everyone here is very nice."

The award expires March 2014.

