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*A group of Fort Valley State University Science Technology Engineering and Mathematic (STEM) Scholars pose at the recent Historically Black Colleges and Universities – Undergraduate Programs (HBCU-UP) meeting sponsored by the National Science Foundation in Atlanta.*

### **FVSU scholars don't leave conference empty handed**

*Submitted by the Agricultural Communications*

Six Fort Valley State University National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded STEM Scholars won awards at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities – Undergraduate Programs (HBCU-UP) meeting sponsored by the NSF at the Westin Peachtree Plaza in Atlanta from Oct. 23-26. There were approximately 700 attendees. The 23 Fort Valley State students attended the event with Dr. Sarwan Dhir, the director of the FVSU's Center for Biotechnology who oversees multiple undergraduate research programs. Dr. Melinda F. Davis, interim chair of FVSU's Biology Department, also attended the event.

“The research work presented by our students is comparable to research being done anywhere else,” Dhir said. “For our students to attend and win awards at this big conference and walk away with honors is a clear example of their academic prowess as young scholars.”

There were approximately 700 attendees and were more than 300 poster and 150 oral presentations from STEM students throughout the country. Students received \$300 for first place, \$200 for second place and \$100 for third place.

The following students were honored:

**Gabrielle Jones**, a junior majoring in biology won the first place award in Environmental Science category for her poster, “The Affects of a Dominant Competitor, *Distaplia occidentalis*, on Species Richness and Community Structure in Humboldt Bay, California.”

“I was honored to receive the first place award. This was a big surprise to me. I am thankful that the judges chose my poster,” she said. The aspiring pediatrician added, “My research experience has helped me in many ways. Mostly it improved my critical thinking skills. It taught me how to critically examine and interpret new knowledge. I learned much about marine life that I did not know.”

**Tameka Janea Howard**, a junior majoring in chemistry won second place in the biological sciences category. She conducted her research during a summer internship at Fort Valley State University’s Center for Biotechnology. Her poster project was entitled, “High Frequency Plant Regeneration in *Valeriana officinalis* via Somatic Embryogenesis.”

“I feel very proud about my winning, not only because of the award or recognition but simply because other scientist who evaluated my research and presentation thought it was significant and innovative; therefore, it gives me a sense of validation that what I am doing is fundamental in the continuance of research,” Howard said.

This aspiring pharmacist said she is grateful for the biotechnology program at FVSU that focuses on plant science.

“My involvement and accomplishments within this program have motivated me at times when I needed it most.” Howard said. “I just want Dr. Dhir and [research professional] Dr. [Hari] Singh and all of the other mentors within the Biotechnology Center to know that I am immensely thankful beyond words for the dedication and commitment that they have for me and other students in impacting and shaping our futures in the careers of science.

**Lillian Oglesby** a junior majoring in Plant Science with a concentration in biotechnology won second place in the environmental science category. Her poster presentation was entitled, “Sequencing the Sixth Chromosome of the Potato Genome.”

“I feel honored and privileged,” said Oglesby, who conducted her research at Michigan State University for the presentation.

Oglesby, who plans to pursue a doctorate in plant genomics, said she is thankful for those who work with her at the Center for Biotechnology. “I appreciate their willingness to allow me the opportunity to work in their lab, and they were very supportive and encouraging,” she said.

**Jarielle Fluellen**, a senior majoring in animal science, won second place in the biological sciences category for her poster presentation on “How Many Cells Can Be Harvested from a Pig’s Umbilical Cord?” She conducted her research at a summer internship at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.

“I was extremely excited about winning the award at such a prestigious conference,” Fluellen said. “This was also my first internship and first time presenting at a national level so I was very

fortunate for the opportunity.”

Fluellen would like to pursue a career in the fields of either pharmacology or nursing.

“I would like to thank my mentors for encouraging me to participate in [the HBCU-UP] program and for challenging me as a student and researcher. Their efforts and mine will ultimately give me the opportunity to make a smooth and successful transition from undergraduate to graduate school,” Fluellen said.

**Charlie Ponder III**, a junior majoring in biology, won first place in the biology category for his poster, “Investigating Root-Knot Nematode Infection of Amino Acid Transport Mutants.” He did his summer internship at Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in St. Louis, Mo.

“I am grateful to have won an award of this caliber. I plan to someday become an orthodontist. The Biology Department at FVSU provided me with the basic essentials to go out and present my research information with not only class, but dignity,” Ponder said.

**Megan Wilkerson** won third place for her oral presentation in the biology category. Her presentation was entitled “Comparing Chemical Components of a Baseline Type of Switchgrass Leaves to Efficiently Promote the Conversion of Lignocellulose into Sugar for Ethanol Production.”