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Stony Brook, Hofstra summer programs help produce Regeneron semifinalists



Among the mentors and staff members from Stony Brook University are, from left: Prof. Benjamin S. Hsiao; Karen Kernan, director of the Simons Summer Research Program; Associate Prof. Benjamin L. Martin; and Prof. Iwao Ojima. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

By Joie Tyrrell

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When officials announced the semifinalists in the nation's top competition for high school seniors, there was reason to celebrate at both Stony Brook and Hofstra universities.

Both schools helped produce a number of the top teen scholars named in the Regeneron Science Talent Search 2024, the nation's most prestigious science competition for high schoolers. High school students from Long Island and nationwide have participated in research programs run by the universities, and many teens have been mentored by faculty who are experts in their field.

At Stony Brook University, 10 of the nation's 300 semifinalists are alumni of the school's Simons Summer Research Program, which teaches teens how to conduct college-level research. For decades, Stony Brook professors have mentored hundreds of semifinalists — including five named earlier this month.

"They are very inspiring ... and it has been a privilege to mentor these future leaders," said Ben Hsiao, a chemistry professor at Stony Brook University who has served as a mentor for two decades.

A summer science program at Hofstra University helped produce two semifinalists this year, as well as another who was mentored by a Hofstra professor.

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"I never really expected it and it kind of felt unreal to me," said Heemali Patel, 17, a senior at Herricks High School. She credited her Hofstra mentor, Jase Bernhardt, with helping her achieve the goal. "He gave me independence to do what I wanted," she said. "He guided me through what kind of steps would be best for my study."

Fifty local high school seniors were named semifinalists in the Regeneron competition, with Long Island having the most honorees of any region in the country. Semifinalists, known as scholars, will find out Wednesday if they advance when the Society for Science, which runs the competition, announces the next round of 40 finalists. Those students will travel in March to Washington, D.C., where the top 10 will be named.

High school students who compete in the Regeneron competition often spend months on projects.

Some use outside laboratories for the work, but not all do. Copiague's Kemmora Simmons conducted her research on fruit flies in-house at Walter G O'Connell High School under the direction of the school's science staff. Many others seek mentors outside of the school setting — including at hospitals, laboratories and universities.

At Stony Brook, the Simons program is attended by students from all over the country. The program is competitive, drawing nearly 900 entries, and applicants are nominated by their high schools, officials said.

There's no tuition. The program is supported by Jim and Marilyn Simons, the benefactors whose recent gift to the school totaled \$500 million. Their goal, said Karen Kernan, director of the program, is for high school students to be able to experience what college-level scientific research is like at a young age. Not all the students in the program participate in scientific competitions, but many do, she said.

Those who stay on campus pay for room and board. There are no classes; rather, they work with faculty and graduate students to fully research a topic that can vary from astronomy to physics to chemistry.

Hsiao said students learn how to manage their time and their expectations. In addition, they learn how to produce an end result and be able to communicate their findings in a clear way.

"They take it seriously, and mentors also take it very seriously. We don't want them to waste their time," he said.

Students who enter the Regeneron competition also may have participated in other Stony Brook programs or been mentored by staff there. Since 1997, nearly 600 semifinalists had been mentored by faculty at Stony Brook.

Victoria Tan, 17, of Jericho High School, a semifinalist in the Regeneron competition, attended the Simons program.

Tan switched her research topic after completing the Simons program but said lessons she learned there proved valuable by giving her access to cutting-edge technology and a peek "into how research at that level worked."

At Hofstra, Bernhardt, director of Hofstra's programs in meteorology and sustainability, mentored Patel — answering her questions and helping guide her work. Her research focused on the impact of temperature and precipitation on amphibians, and when she hit a roadblock “we talked about how to overcome it,” he said.

Hofstra’s competitive summer program has fielded a number of semifinalists and finalists as well, according to Gail Bennington, director of the Hofstra University Summer Science Research Program. It runs for about six weeks. Two semifinalists, Ankur Raghavan of Bethpage High School and Christina Pan of Plainview-Old Bethpage High School, attended in the summer.

“I’m always so impressed by the motivation and drive of these students,” Bernhardt said. “They have these rigorous academic years and in the summer, you would think they would want to relax but they just keep going.”

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Stony Brook and Hofstra universities helped produce** a number of the top scholars named in the Regeneron Science Talent Search 2024.
- **At Stony Brook, 10 of the nation’s 300 semifinalists** are alumni of the school’s Simons Summer Research Program, which teaches teens how to conduct college-level research.
- **A summer science program at Hofstra** helped produce two semifinalists this year; another was mentored by a Hofstra professor.



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