ASTRONOMY

DEPARTMENT OFFICE
Darwin Hall 300
(707) 664-2119
http://phys-astro.sonoma.edu

DEPARTMENT CHAIR
Lynn R. Cominsky

ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR
Cathi Cari-Shudde

Faculty

Lynn R. Cominsky
Jeremy S. Qualls
Saeid Rahimi*
Scott A. Severson
Hongtao Shi
** Faculty Early Retirement Program*

Program Offered

Minor in Astronomy

Astronomy, offered as a minor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy, is the study of the planets, stars, and galaxies in the universe beyond the earth's atmosphere. The fields of astronomy and astrophysics, the application of physics principles to astronomical observations, today deal with essential questions, such as the origin and nature of the "Big Bang;" the subsequent creation of matter and the chemical elements; the eventual formation and evolution of structure in the universe; and the life cycles of stars, including the tremendous explosions which are often their death knells and can lead to the formation of black holes. Modern astronomy leans heavily on the concepts and techniques of physics and mathematics. Astronomers use ground- and space-based instruments that detect photons spanning the electromagnetic spectrum, as well as particles such as cosmic rays or neutrinos. An emerging branch of astronomy seeks to correct the effect of the Earth's turbulent atmosphere using adaptive optics, thus providing "sharper" views of the universe. As a result of astronomy's cosmic scope and dependence on physics, degrees in astronomy are generally granted at the graduate level. The minor in astronomy, with a B.S. in physics, is an excellent preparation for graduate study in astronomy or astrophysics.

Careers in Astronomy

Career fields for which an astronomy minor would be beneficial include aerospace, astronomy, atmospheric science, education, planetary geology, and geophysics.

A variety of courses are available within the minor, including intermediate and advanced laboratory work that utilizes the department's two observatories, and a number of descriptive courses for students whose major interests lie in other fields.

The SSU Campus Observatory, in operation since 1976, houses two telescopes, a 14-inch Schmidt-Cassegrain and a 10-inch Newtonian, with auxiliary instrumentation for CCD imaging and spectroscopy. Both telescopes are computer controlled. The observatory is used by students in laboratory and lecture courses, and is also available for faculty and student research projects. A NASA-funded research observatory, which saw "first light" in 2004, is located in the darker skies of northern Sonoma County. It includes a remotely controlled and operated 14-inch telescope mounted on a computer-controlled Paramount and equipped with a high quantum efficiency CCD detector and filter wheel. Equipment available for observational work in astronomy at SSU is ideally suited for studying objects that vary in time and space. This includes objects that vary in brightness such as pulsating, eclipsing, and cataclysmic star systems. This also includes the variable nuclei of active galaxies such as quasars and blazars, Gamma-ray Bursts (GRBs), and extrasolar planetary systems that exhibit planetary transits. Our equipment is also ideally suited for follow-up observations of Near Earth Objects (NEOs), which may threaten Earth.

The department is developing a remotely operable, approximately 1-meter telescope in southern Mendocino county: the Galbreath Wildlands Preserve Observatory. This will be a sustainable and ecologically sensitive facility, making the project innovative and cross-disciplinary. The department also houses a laboratory for experimental astrophysics research, where students can test and build cameras, spectrometers, and other equipment for SSU's telescopes. The laboratory includes an Adaptive Optics testbed, which uses advanced technology to measure and sharpen images. Faculty and students have built and use an astronomical Adaptive Optics system in collaboration with partner institutions.

All students are strongly encouraged to participate in the ongoing research programs of the department, and/or to propose student-initiated research programs.

Minor in Astronomy

Completion of a minimum of 20 units in astronomy and physical or life science courses, at least 12 of which must be in astronomy, constitutes a minor in astronomy. Courses that are used to meet requirements in a student's major may not be used toward the minor in astronomy. Supporting courses for the major may be used. Interested students should consult with an advisor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy.