

UNH lands grant for study of earth sciences

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DURHAM — A recently funded program at the University of New Hampshire hopes to revolutionize how middle and high school students learn earth sciences.

The National Science Foundation awarded a \$3 million grant to UNH and three partnering colleges to institute a summer program for science teachers to buff up their knowledge of earth sciences.

The program will run for six weeks this summer at UNH and expand to include all four colleges next summer with plans to use it as a model that other schools could copy across the country.

"In most schools, the more recent tradition has been that biology physics and chemistry have been the core, and earth sciences have been more of an elective course," said Karen

Graham, director of the UNH organization that applied for the grant. "One of the reasons (the National Science Foundation) put out this call is they want earth sciences to become one of the mainstream sciences."

Earth sciences are gaining more prominence along with the recognition of global warming, said Graham, director of UNH's Leitzel Center for Mathematics, Science, and Engineering Education.

Many middle and high school educators don't have a comprehensive understanding of earth sciences prior to teaching and the field itself has changed in recent years, Graham said.

Many smaller schools can hire only a handful of science teachers, not all of whom necessarily know a lot about earth sciences, Graham said, and the institute can help give those teachers a better understanding of the subject.

Most earth science classes

teach the basics of the planet, focusing heavily on the land and its evolution to the detriment of the atmosphere and ocean's effects. Newer ways of studying earth sciences look at the planet as a giant system and survey all aspects together and how they interact.

The program, called Transforming Earth System Science Education, will instruct teachers on the newer methods of studying Earth and give them some firsthand experience with UNH faculty and researchers and a chance to get their hands dirty participating in some research themselves, Graham said.

About 50 people from the neighboring colleges and their surrounding areas are expected to attend the first program this summer. The other colleges involved are Dillard University in New Orleans, Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina and Pennsylvania State University.