

A&T's NASA center becoming self-sufficient

By JOYA WESLEY
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GREENSBORO — Dr. Frederick Ferguson, director of the NASA Center for Aerospace Research at North Carolina A&T State University, has a deadline to meet.

The center, one of 14 of its type funded by NASA at minority institutions through its University Research Centers program, is scheduled to become self-sufficient by 2002. By then, Ferguson has to secure a steady stream of at least \$3 million a year in funded research.

"I'm selling a service," he says, "the brains of this university."

Luckily, he's not alone. A&T's College of Engineering, a powerhouse of cutting-edge research, is at the forefront of university-wide efforts to support the center. "We're going to do all that we can to make sure that the center gets all the external funding it needs," said Dr. Lonnie Shape, dean of the college and chairman of the ~NASA-CAR Internal Review Board.

The NASA University Research Centers program seeks to foster new aerospace science and technology concepts, expand the nation's research base, increase the participation of minority institutions in mainstream research and increase the number of historically under represented students with advanced degrees in NASA-related fields.

A&T's NASA-CAR, established in 1992, conducts interdisciplinary research for next-generation aircraft and spacecraft. The center has five research components: aerospace structures, controls and guidance, computational fluid dynamics, human-machine systems engineering and propulsion.



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NASA currently provides \$1 million a year to support the center. A&T provides space in its state-of-the-art Edward B. Fort Interdisciplinary Research Center and pays half of the director's salary. NASA's contribution will end in 2001.

A strategic plan, drafted with the help of A&T business professor Dr. Japhet Nkonge, outlines

the steps the center will take to achieve self-sufficiency.

"We're in transition - we're moving," Ferguson said. "We started in 1992 from ground zero, and we expect to bring in a minimum of \$3 million in the next three years."

A big part of NASA-CAR's mission involves generating financial incentives, such as scholar-

ships and stipends, to encourage students to seek advanced degrees in aerospace-related disciplines.

"Because our students are so much in demand, it's hard to get them to go to graduate school," said Dr. William Craft, chairman of A&T's mechanical engineering department and a member of NASA-CAR's management team. "That's a good thing, but it

becomes part of the problem."

A&T - which already is the nation's No. 1 producer of minorities with degrees in math, science, engineering and technology - is making efforts throughout the university to increase the number of students receiving advanced degrees in these areas where minorities are so severely under represented.

"Our role as a research center is to help the university fulfill its mission," Ferguson said. "We want to do a good job of that."

Last year, the center graduated 12 master's students. Four Ph.D. candidates, first graduates of A&T's new Ph.D. programs in mechanical and electrical engineering.

Their research experience with NASA-CAR increases their marketability.

"We want to ensure that when our students leave us, they go into the major aerospace industries," Ferguson said. "Once we have a diversified pool of aerospace professionals, there's no telling where their talents can lead them."

To keep the center meeting its goals, Ferguson is busy marketing the center and its research capability.

Nobody's going to give you money forever," he says. "What we want to do is make sure that when one grant ends, we have two or three more in the pipeline."

Ferguson convened the advisory board this semester in order to help the center attract funded research and educational opportunities, and to enhance its participation within the university. The board, which includes university administrators from all areas, will meet twice a year to evaluate the center's progress and to make recommendations to the director.

Nkongé's involvement is just one example of the center's efforts to bring all of A&T's intellectual resources to bear on the center's success. "We've benefited a lot from this program," Craft said. "Our research has become more focused. We have to find ways to get the university to help us make sure this center succeed. We have to craft a plant that's going to encourage everybody to participate."

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