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World-Herald editorial: NASA helps Nebraska students

Small-town boy makes good. It's an old story, but often it's a reality. Consider Nebraska native Clayton Anderson.

He didn't grow up in a mega-city, he didn't attend Ivy League schools and he didn't ride on a cushion of privilege.

Ashland, Neb., is his hometown. He showed great dedication to his studies, graduating from Hastings College with honors at the undergraduate level. He went on to earn a master's degree in aerospace engineering from Iowa State.

Through his talent, self-discipline and years of hard work, Anderson rose to become one of NASA's most respected flight design specialists. He then entered the astronaut corps and has been in space twice, in 2007 and this spring, aboard the International Space Station.

He stands tall as a role model.

In 2010, are there other potential Clayton Andersons out there across Nebraska?

Are there conscientious young men and women with the skills and energy to strengthen NASA and our country's scientific community, if those young people are just given the proper support and encouragement?

Of course there are. And NASA, to its credit, is helping them.

America's space agency also is nurturing outstanding scientific research by faculty members at Nebraska's institutions of higher learning.

For the past 18 years, a program known as the NASA Nebraska Space Grant initiative — part of the space agency's regular budget — has distributed funds in the Cornhusker State to kindle the scientific potential of students. The funds annually total around \$800,000 and support programs by which selected Nebraska students work on scientific projects with faculty members at various colleges and universities.

At the University of Nebraska at Kearney, for example, a Space Grant project is studying how satellite technology can aid in drought studies. Another project looks at connections between satellite information and estimates of dryland corn yields.

At Western Nebraska Community College, a Space Grant project involves space imagery. At Nebraska Indian Community College, water and soil evaluation are the focus of a project.

At Hastings College, the topic for a project is interferometry, a sophisticated study of light waves with applications for such fields as astronomy, fiber optics and remote sensing.

Other institutions involved in the Space Grant program: Chadron State College; McCook Community College (affiliated with Mid-Plains Community College); Little Priest Community College; Creighton University; the College of St. Mary; Metropolitan Community College; the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; University of Nebraska at Omaha; and University of Nebraska Medical Center.

"We've taken seriously our statewide mission," UNO Professor Scott Tarry, the Nebraska space grant director, told The World-Herald. "It's important for young people across the state to be exposed to those opportunities."

NASA also distributes funding for a select set of advanced scientific projects by faculty members. In Nebraska, the four current projects include the study of coatings for satellites (a collaboration between UNL and UNK); software assurance (UNL); surgical robotics (UNMC and UNL); and radio frequency identification (UNL).

"There are a lot of smart kids right across the state," says Tarry, who also is executive director of UNO's Aviation Institute.

He points to Clayton Anderson as an example of a small-town Nebraska boy who, through hard work, achieved his dream.

The same can hold true for so many young people across Nebraska. How encouraging it is to see them receiving needed support and guidance to explore science as well as their own potential.

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