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Summer for science

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It's a hot summer morning in July. While kids throughout Utah are riding water slides, sleeping late or watching million-dollar productions in darkened movie theaters, a group of teenagers is at work in a basement laboratory cutting open cow eyeballs.

And they're having a great time.

The eighth Biotechnology Summer Academy at Utah State University concludes today. Forty-six high-school students from around the state — and as far away as Washington — attended the annual event, where they took part in real research in fields including biology, genomics, bioinformatics, chemistry and others.

The program teaches the students a lot, but it is far different than sitting in school, they explained.

"Here, you're finding out new things, new procedures," said Sydney Van Dyke, a participant from Price. "You're doing things that have never been done before."

The program is intended to give top high school students hands-on experience in a variety of science fields and give them information to help make decisions for their future, said Kamal Rashid, associate director of education at USU's Center for Integrated Biosystems.

The event's organizers hope the experience will encourage the students to find their way back to USU. So far, about 30 to 40 percent of summer academy participants have enrolled at USU after graduating, Rashid said. Of those, many get full scholarships.

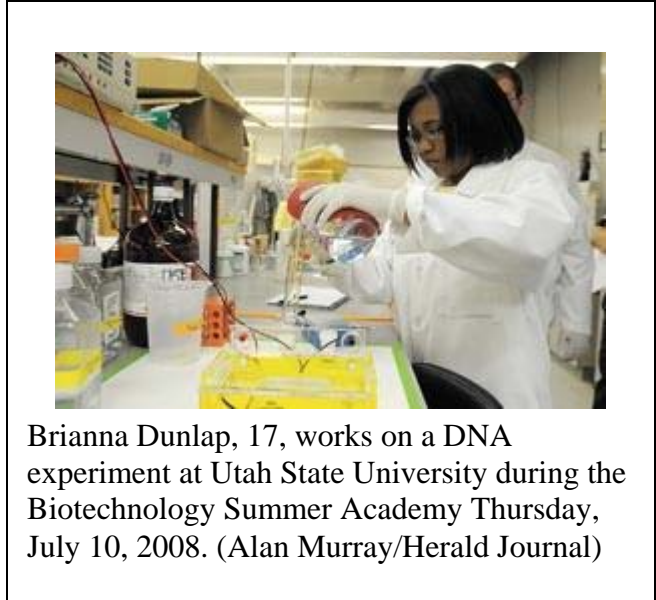
Before the five-day program starts, participants designate which fields they are most interested in. Throughout the week, the students assist USU faculty with ongoing research projects in those fields. Though the teens are newcomers to the research, they can still contribute in a short time with the faculty's guidance, said participant Marley Haupt.

On the final day of the academy each year, the students present their research to each other and their parents, and the students with the top presentations get awards.

The summer academy also includes an advanced program for students returning to the program, Rashid said. Those students take part in research with Rashid dealing with recombinant protein fermentation — used to create large quantities of medical materials such as insulin. That's something most undergraduates never even do, he said.

"That's a very valuable experience," he said. "That gives them a very good edge in the future."

During the week the students stay in USU dorms and participate in activities each night.



Brianna Dunlap, 17, works on a DNA experiment at Utah State University during the Biotechnology Summer Academy Thursday, July 10, 2008. (Alan Murray/Herald Journal)

Most participants in the program each year are female, a fact contrary to the traditional idea that science is only a man's field, said Afifa Sabir, director of the program. This year, 26 of the 46 participants were girls.

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