FRI Stream Gets a New Name

Starting in spring 2015, the Freshman Research Initiative (FRI) Cell Signaling and Signal Transduction Stream will be named the Sarah Simmons Cell Signaling Stream. Since its launch in 2005, FRI at the College of Natural Sciences has revolutionized the way science is taught at the undergraduate level. FRI has become a national model for education through research. In summer of 2014, the co-founder and visionary leader for FRI, Dr. Sarah Simmons, departed UT Austin and moved to Washington DC to join forces with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, an institution that has been generously supporting the program since its inception. In an effort to honor Sarah, leaders from the FRI Task Force, a subset of the College of Natural Sciences Dean’s Advisory Council, set out in secret to leverage a generous $75,000 anonymous matching grant in order to name a Research Stream in 2014-15 for Sarah. The matching grant, which was donated in December 2013 as a way to help broaden the base of support for FRI, came at the perfect time and allowed council members to “double” their giving.

As well, CNS alumni who went through the FRI program and have since graduated, were invited to participate with gifts at all levels. While significant gifts were made towards this $75,000 match by FRI Task Force members, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this effort was the dozens of $10, $25 and $50 gifts that came in within minutes of the e-announcement on this effort from recent graduates and alumni.
The Cell Signaling Stream is led by Dr. Stanley Roux, a Distinguished Teaching Professor in the department of Molecular Biosciences, and Dr. Greg Clark, the research educator. The selection of this stream to receive this honorary name was not random. The stream was launched in 2007 as one of the streams that contributed to a major expansion of the program. Students in the stream study the effect of extracellular nucleotides on plant growth. Therefore, the science endeavors of the stream are dear to Sarah’s heart, a botanist by training.

In addition, Dr. Clark has been a major driving force for STEM outreach efforts, which is to the core mission of FRI. The generous gift by FRI alums will be matched by the College of Natural Sciences to fund the stream for three years.