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More students to view the stars; UH-Hilo undergrads allotted telescope time

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By TOM CALLIS Hawaii Tribune-Herald

Astronomy students won't have to wait until graduate school to use one of Hawaii's telescopes.

The University of Hawaii's Institute for Astronomy, based at its Manoa campus, agreed to dedicate up to 16 nights of observing time a year at observatories on Mauna Kea to undergraduate students at UH-Hilo.

That will come out of UH's share of observing time at the telescopes, which ranges from 10 to 15 percent depending on the observatory.

Guenther Hasinger, IfA director, said it's unusual for an undergraduate astronomy program to be granted dedicated viewing time. Typically, observing time is reserved based solely on the caliber of research.

But few programs sit at the bottom of one of the world's top telescope sites.

"From my point of view, it is absolutely necessary to have a very strong astronomy program in Hilo," Hasinger said.

"We want to ground the telescopes in the community."

The move follows initiatives by some telescopes to provide research time to high school seniors.

Hasinger said the discussions partly came out of the planned decommissioning of UH-Hilo's Hoku Kea teaching telescope atop Mauna Kea. Meanwhile, a replacement telescope is being ordered, though it lacks a permanent location.

UH President David Lassner in May signed the memorandum authorizing the observing time.

The document also says UH-Hilo will hire two more faculty members for its astronomy program.

Marianne Takamiya, chairwoman of UH-Hilo's physics and astronomy department, said students likely will be working with a faculty member for their viewing time.

"They have to work closely with faculty or researchers at UH-Hilo and UH-Manoa," she said.

Takamiya said she hopes this will give her students an edge when applying for jobs.

Under the agreement, UH-Hilo students will be provided six nights the first five years, 10 nights in the second five years and 16 nights thereafter.

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