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NCSU stats professor Pantula to lead NSF's math division

Triangle Business Journal - by [James Gallagher](#)

RALEIGH – The Triangle’s reputation as a pharmaceutical and biotechnology hub is well established. Now, its role as a center for statistical and mathematical research is beginning to gain similar recognition.

It’s nothing new, really. Consider, for example, the resounding success of two companies launched in the Triangle – **SAS** Institute, which is a world leader in developing statistical analysis software, and **Quintiles Transnational**, which operates with a heavy emphasis on biostatistics.

The founder of Quintiles, Dennis Gillings, holds a Ph.D. in mathematics, while SAS co-founder Jim Goodnight has a doctorate in statistics.

Now, another local statistician is making a bold mark in a different way, but one that’s seen as a coup for the Triangle in the world of numbers: Sastry Pantula, head of the Department of Statistics at **N.C. State University**, is taking a three-year leave of absence to relocate to Washington D.C., where he will serve as the head of the Division of Mathematical Sciences at the **National Science Foundation**.

It’s an important position. Pantula will have the lead role in setting the course for mathematical and statistical research across the nation as well as oversee a \$250 million research budget. “It’s an exciting position, mainly because I get to see the best research that is happening in this country and help set the directions in mathematical sciences,” he says.

Mathematical and statistical research often takes a backseat to the more expensive and relatable scientific and medical research, but that doesn’t mean the work isn’t without merit.

In fact, research into the concepts of number theory, which is concerned with the properties of numbers, such as prime numbers, was once considered a fringe area of no usable value. But the field has become vital to encryption technology, including many online banking systems.

And more work into statistical analysis is needed, given the growing amount of data that is being collected on a daily basis. Numbers related to the stock market, commercial sales and Internet usage are being tallied on a regular basis. “We’re swimming in sensors and drowning in data,” says Peter March, a probability mathematician at **Ohio State University** and the man Pantula will succeed at the NSF. Statisticians, he says, are trained to sort through large collections of data and find relevant trends and information.

Pantula’s appointment is a coup for statisticians, who have never led the division. While many lay people see math and statistics as essentially the same, the fields actually are different. In fact, there is a bit of a rivalry between folks in the two fields.

Pantula acknowledges the fact, saying that during the interview and appointment process, some people were concerned that selecting a statistician would minimize the focus on mathematicians. He says he will appreciate both sides.

The NSF is far from a stranger to the Triangle. The foundation provides millions of dollars a year to researchers in the area. Since 2005, the division has provided more than \$41.8 million to support research at NCSU, **UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke University**, according to NSF figures. In that period, North Carolina has received the seventh most in mathematical and statistical research grants in the U.S.

Additionally, the NSF sends \$2.7 million a year to the Statistical and Applied Mathematics Science Institute, or SAMSI, a program jointly created by NCSU, UNC and Duke that’s in Research Triangle Park. It is one of eight mathematical science institutes nationally funded by the NSF and the only one dedicated to statistical research.

The appointment of Pantula to the national position will augment the area’s reputation among statistical and mathematical researchers. “It’s good for the visibility of mathematics and statistics in the Triangle,” says Richard Smith, a statistics professor at UNC and director of SAMSI.

Adds Armistead Sapp, senior director of SAS’ education practice, “Dr. Pantula’s elevation to this post is another recognition of the academic quality of Triangle universities, especially in quantitative fields.”

Of course, what the appointment won’t necessarily do is bring more research dollars to the area. Conflict-of-interest policies prevent Pantula from pushing money to one program or another. “The research should speak for itself,” he says of funding decisions.



Steve Wilson
Sastry Pantula sees appointment as an honor.

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