Hartnell student gets NASA scholarship

Chris Halcon gets $10,000 annual allowance, internship
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In his senior year in high school, Chris Halcon was accepted to University of California-Berkeley and was selected as a finalist for the Incentive Awards Program, which provides up to $32,000 in scholarships to students of low-income background.

The money wasn't enough to cover all his expenses, so instead of heading north to the four-year university, Halcon had to settle for community college, "just Hartnell."

"Hartnell has this stigma," the 20-year-old student said. "It was like 'You're only going to go to Hartnell?' It was disappointing."

Three years later, after completing two internships with the Naval Postgraduate School and earning potentially $50,000 in scholarships, Halcon admits that attending Hartnell College is likely one of the best things he's ever done.

"In the Hartnell community there are plenty of people willing to help if you're willing to work hard for it," Halcon said. "Everyone over here is willing to lend a hand ... you almost get the feeling they're more motivated than you to make sure you finish."

Halcon has just earned a NASA Motivating Undergraduates in Science and Technology Scholarship, a highly competitive national award that comes with a $10,000 yearly allowance renewable for up to three years, and a paid summer internship at a NASA center.

That's on top of receiving a 2011 Matsui scholarship, a $20,000 grant to finish his undergraduate education.

"I'm really excited about" the NASA award, Halcon said grinning.

"Since they just launched the last shuttle, it'll be interesting to see how they plan to send people back up into space."

Born in Salinas, Halcon has always liked to build things: From working with Legos and airplane models to helping his dad restore cars, the young scholar has enjoyed working on things with his hands.

He was aiming for a career in physical science or physics, more on the theoretical aspects than their applications. Then, he attended Hartnell's Summer Undergraduate Math and Science program, where students explore different scientific fields, participate in hands-on experiments, work with local scientists and earn a $1,200 stipend.

After that summer, Halcon decided his calling was engineering, a field where he could see the practical applications of his work.

During his first semester at Hartnell, a student colleague who'd been employed at the Naval Postgraduate School saw 3-D modeling Halcon had done and encouraged him to apply for an internship. He got the internship in March 2009.
"I was really interested in it, I really enjoyed it," Halcon said. "I didn't know much of the science yet."

Halcon began by working with the Solar Cell Array Tester program, charged with developing a platform to test solar cells in space. Through a program coordinated with Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, the solar cells are launched as a compact satellite known as a CubeSat to gather information from outer space.

"Think of it as a really really strong Jack-in-the-Box," Halcon said. "One holds a satellite that can be ejected from an open hatch."

The project is expected to launch a tester in the next couple of years.

James Newman, former astronaut and NPS professor of space systems, described Halcon as a quiet person interested in the projects he's worked on.

"I was quite pleased when I heard that he had been selected for the NASA scholarship," Newman said.

In his second internship, this time at the Modeling, Virtual Environments, and Simulation Institute at NPS, Halcon worked on a flight simulator designed to measure how helicopter pilots use topographical maps to maneuver and navigate their aircraft.

In the simulations, Halcon was surprised to learn that avid hikers were able to better recognize the landscape than helicopter pilots did, he said. The program is aimed at trying to design better training tools for helicopter pilots.

Even though he's worked almost full time while going to school, Halcon has found time for volunteering with a wide array of organizations such as Return of the Natives and the Big Sur International Marathon, doing tutoring for students of all ages, outreach and picking up litter.

Halcon often compares notes with his former classmates, some of whom who have attended four-year universities. They're spending a lot more money for classes, some with absentee professors. And they're not getting the internship opportunities he's got.

"It's odd to hear them struggle over the same material," he said, referring to math. "We're all learning the same things, but they're paying exorbitant amounts. The same education is available at a fraction of the cost."

Halcon is the fifth student from Hartnell to earn a NASA MUST scholarship in the last few years. Previous winners have been Ricky Fernandez, Daniel Chairez, Rodrigo Sanchez and Juan Ledesma. All participated in Hartnell's summer STEM internship program.

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