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2011

NSF Grant Awarded to Team Headed by Spalding

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Recommended Citation
Wallace, Sherry, "NSF Grant Awarded to Team Headed by Spalding" (2011). *News and Events.* Paper 1657.
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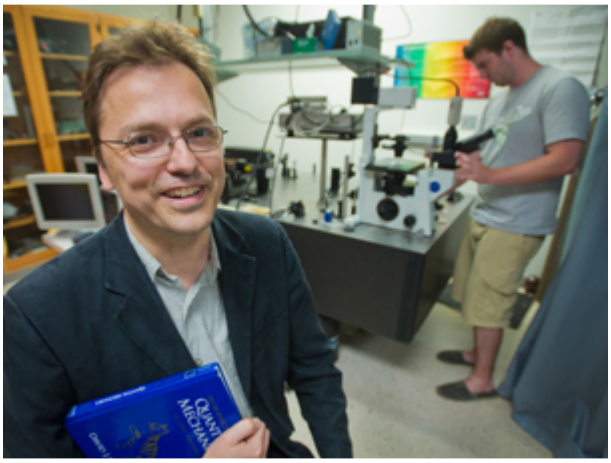

Professor of Physics Gabe Spalding

August 29, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A team led by Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of Physics Gabe Spalding has been awarded a grant of more than $451,000 from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Spalding is the principal investigator on a project aimed toward improving laboratory instruction in physics for undergraduate college students in the United States.

The NSF, an independent federal agency, supports fundamental research and education across all fields of science and engineering. Spalding's NSF grant will fund a conference on laboratory instruction slated for 2012, and, separately, a training program for faculty and staff to develop contemporary instructional laboratories. Spalding said these efforts will provide instructors with a focused, hand-on approach to guiding students through the laboratory. “We’re really talking about a revolution in the way physics is taught,” he said, noting the program will “promote significant updates in the experiments and techniques taught, as well as inclusion of contemporary concepts.”

The initiatives in the grant, titled “Improving ‘Beyond First Year’ Physics Laboratory Instruction,” are in response to a recent national survey of laboratory instructors spearheaded by Spalding’s team and working with The Ames Library. The study indicated curricular development is vital for success in the instructional laboratory. “We found many needs,” said Spalding. “This award really recognizes the value of our initial efforts at addressing some of those needs over the past few years, and gives us the means to make a significant difference at the national level.”

Spalding, who has been with Illinois Wesleyan since 1996, earned a doctorate from Harvard University. He has served as president of the Advanced Laboratory Physics Association, and is active with the American Association of Physics Teachers. He is a leading researcher on holographic optical trapping, and has chaired the Optical Trapping and Optical Micro-Manipulation Research Conference since 2004.

Spalding said the award is a testament to the spirit of excellence that is fostered at Illinois Wesleyan. “Our Physics Department at IWU has done many things over the years that we’re proud of, but I really feel that in the past couple of years we’ve been able to take our own program to a new level and, though we’re still evolving, I think we might already serve as a model to many other institutions.”

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