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By KAREN WING

Penn State professors Drs. Jogesh Babu, statistics, and Eric Feigelson, astronomy and astrophysics, have made it their business to study the sky and all that it holds. And now, after seizing an opportunity in the field, they have become stars in their own right.

Fifteen years ago, the two realized that researchers in observational astronomy often encounter situations where the scientific goals require a statistical interpretation of complex data, a situation that is occurring with greater frequency as exploration of the skies has widened through new technology.

Babu and Feigelson began to collaborate and to apply statistics to solve these astronomical problems. In 1991, with a development grant and staff support from Penn State Conferences, they organized the first interdisciplinary international conference, Statistical Challenges in Modern Astronomy (SCMA), to bring statisticians and astronomers together to discuss their research. The field of astrostatistics was born, and Penn State was rocketed to the forefront of the advancement of statistical methodology for astronomical research.

The field has matured even further thanks to Babu and Feigelson: The two received funding from the National Science Foundation to create a Center for Astrostatistics, which they did in 2003. The center brings together statisticians and astronomers internationally to help develop statistical expertise within the field of astronomy and other observational sciences.

The activities of the center include holding conferences, such as the SCMA; summer programs; collaborating with other institutions, like the Statistical and Applied Mathematical Sciences Institute in North Carolina, to develop workshops and other research and training

# Rock Stars, Real Stars

## & Astronomical Success

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### Faculty research conferences serve as a launching pad for enduring opportunities, collaboration and innovation

programs; and hosting international researchers.

Since the first conference, astrostatistics groups have formed across the country. “We were the first to have brought astronomers and statisticians together, and Penn State is still the leader in this field,” said Babu.

#### **A Powerful Tool**

Long a feature of scholarly life, academic research conferences have become a launching pad for building new relationships, developing collaborative projects, recruiting new faculty and securing funding for the creation of a center, book or other initiative.

“The ability to convene scholars around ideas is what conferences are all about. It can be a powerful tool for an individual faculty member or an academic unit,” said Suzanne Wrye, director of Conferences. “It can attract national attention, spark a discussion and showcase our faculty research and facilities. It’s an important part of what makes a research university great.”

Sometimes, it can even make for a rockin’ good time, as evidenced by “Glory Days: A Bruce Springsteen Symposium” held in fall 2005. This event, organized by Penn State Conferences and held at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, N.J., provided an international forum for leaders in sociology, musicology, political science, religion and cultural anthropology to discuss the “Boss” and his impact on music and culture. In addition to creating new knowledge in the field, the conference’s success has also led to collaborations and discussions at Penn State around the planning of a gospel music conference.

#### **DVD Release**

More than 100 delegates from 17 countries participated in an Indigenous Knowledges conference at Penn State in 2004. It was an organizational feat to draw individuals from places such as Africa and the Pacific Rim to the conference—directed by Penn State Professors Drs. Audrey Maretzki and Ladislaus (Ladi) Semali in collaboration with Conferences—which was the only one of its kind to focus on the knowledge accumulated by native populations and passed down through the generations.

The impact of the conference was extended when Maretzki (food science and nutrition) and Semali (language, media and literacy education) worked with Penn State Public Broadcasting to produce a DVD titled “Indigenous Knowledge: The Future,” to be distributed to conference sponsors and others. The video can be viewed at Penn State’s Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge’s Web site, <http://www.ed.psu.edu/icik/>. More than 200 copies of the DVD have been distributed to conference sponsors and others, and it has been used at other conferences, as well. Maretzki and Semali also received funding to lead a recent workshop in Tanzania.

#### **Raising Awareness**

Another conference has become well known to a diverse audience—Penn State’s annual event on autism, which attracts everyone from medical professionals to families affected by autism. Starting out in 1998 with 300 attendees, the event is now one of the largest meetings of its kind globally. Last summer, the conference drew more

than 2,400 individuals to Penn State's University Park campus.

Sponsored by Penn State and the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the conference provides comprehensive, evidence-based information to assist educators and families in developing effective educational programming for those with autism spectrum disorders. Participants can earn graduate-level credit, continuing education credit and credits toward the American Medical Association Physician's Recognition Award. More than 100 people took courses last year as part of the conference.

"The Pennsylvania Department of Education is thrilled by the participation and growth of our annual conference," said Cathy Scutta, educational consultant, Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network. "Every year we attract more families, educators and behavioral health professionals."

From the thousands served at the National Autism Conference to meetings with as few as 100 attendees (for the first Astrostatistics conference), Penn State Conferences has helped showcase innovative research ideas and provided the platform for long-term leadership. For more information, visit <http://www.outreach.psu.edu/conferences.html> online. ■

## Conference Support Fund

To support the planning of new academic research conferences, Penn State Outreach and Penn State Hospitality Services have created the Research Conference Support Fund.

Through this new initiative, faculty can apply for grants that range from \$5,000 to \$10,000. Applications will be reviewed quarterly. For details and deadlines, contact Suzanne Wrye, director of Conferences, at 814-863-5111 or [csw1@outreach.psu.edu](mailto:csw1@outreach.psu.edu).

## Filmmaker Takes Note of Streaming Video

When former police officer-turned-Penn State Abington Associate Professor of Administration of Justice Dr. Sean Patrick Griffin appeared on Penn State Public Broadcasting's "Take Note" in 2003, little did he know it would bring him to the attention of a Hollywood producer.

In that segment, Patty Satalia interviewed Griffin, the author of "Philadelphia's Black Mafia, A Social and Political History," an account of the mob that terrorized Philadelphia for 20 years. Digital technologist Jeff Luck streamed that program, along with hundreds of other segments, on the Internet.

Fortress Entertainment, a Hollywood-based production company, happened to see the

streaming video featuring Griffin—a segment that continually received more hits and downloads than any other program—and initially contacted Griffin about doing research for a film.

"They had no idea about my more mainstream second book, 'Black Brothers Inc.: The Violent Rise and Fall of Philadelphia's Black Mafia,' until they called me," reports Griffin. After Griffin's publisher, Milo Books, sent Fortress a press kit, Fortress decided to option the book into a movie.

"It never would have happened if it wasn't for Patty's show," said Griffin.

Courtesy of Penn State Public Broadcasting



A TV appearance leads to a movie contract.