

NASA gives Gravity Probe B team scientific achievement award

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The [Gravity Probe B](#) (GP-B) science mission team—approximately 100 researchers and support staff—received a group achievement award from NASA on Nov. 30. At a ceremony on campus, each person received an individual certificate praising "exceptional dedication and highly innovative scientific and engineering accomplishments leading to the successful execution and completion of the Gravity Probe B Science Mission."

NASA group achievement awards are normally presented in June at NASA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., but a special case was made to present GP-B's award on campus so the many team members from Stanford and nearby Lockheed Martin could attend the celebration. NASA's GP-B Program Manager, Tony Lyons, from Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala., presented the award on the patio of the Ginzton Laboratory.

"We are here to recognize the end of the GP-B mission after 17 months of cryogenic operations," Lyons said. As testament to what GP-B means to NASA, a model of the probe now sits in the heritage gallery of Marshall Space Flight Center alongside models of all the Saturn launch vehicles, Skylab, the moon buggy, the space station, the Chandra X-Ray Observatory and the Hubble Space Telescope, he said.

Gravity Probe B is a collaboration of NASA, Stanford and Lockheed Martin to test Einstein's theories about the universe. The experiment was launched on April 20, 2004. Data collection ended in October. Results

will be announced in 2007.

Professor Blas Cabrera, co-director of the Hansen Experimental Physics Laboratory, described the 1959 poolside conversation between aeronautics and astronautics engineer Robert Cannon and physicists William Fairbank and Leonard Schiff that first explored the possibility of measuring the incredibly small angle of deflection needed to show if Einstein was right about relativity. "That combination of engineering, experimental physics and theoretical physics even today is not very common," he said.

Arthur Bienenstock, vice provost and dean of research and graduate policy, spoke on behalf of the university. "We're enormously proud of this major achievement. Such enormous technical demand managed over so many years by a university—it's a rare event to pull off something so beautifully."

Professor Emeritus Brad Parkinson, GP-B's co-principal investigator with Research Professor Francis Everitt, told the audience that he likened the awards ceremony to a graduation. "I think you were triumphant—you have at least a Ph.D. in whatever it is we did."

He praised Everitt's leadership: "You could not possibly understand what he did to make this happen, and he did it in a nice way. He did not attack anyone else's program. He said, 'Mr. Congressman, Mr. NASA Head, whoever, you really should do this because of the science.' That was a pure motive."

Everitt in turn paid homage to Cannon, Fairbank and Schiff: "We really need to remember that for this experiment we stand on the shoulders of giants."

Source: Stanford University

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