I was thinking recently about how perfect the name COSMOS is for this program, not just because where we are this evening or the obvious science and mathematics connection, but more profoundly, because of how far students’ personal horizons stretch in the course of one month. We may never fully understand the confounding relationship between space and time – our tendency, for example, to magnify or miniaturize either dimension when the occasion suits us – but what continues to amaze me is the way in which we remain inspired by the mysteries of a universe, which continues to elude our imperfect intellectual grasp. And yet we keep searching, revising, reflecting, probing, and exploring, hoping someday to understand our real origins and the trajectory of human evolution, with each small piece of understanding reminding us of how much remains beyond our reach. It is, I believe, this same pattern of expansion and contraction that drives scholastic inquiry and curiosity, ensuring our continued desire to study and learn.

Although COSMOS was created as an academic enrichment program, one of its greatest strengths, I believe has been its influence on the personal vision and aspirations of students. Because students are accepted on the basis of academic merit and demonstrated interest and achievement in science and mathematics, we have been able to reach into many different high schools across the state, bringing students to our campuses who may have never been to an academic institution like the University of California. Many of these students stand out in their local high schools, their interest and potential may be far beyond the capacity of their school to take them where their minds want to lead them. Some of the students who attend COSMOS have never been out of their local communities, many of which lie far outside the cosmopolitan centers of California. But the one thing they all have in common is a love of mathematics and science, and a talent that is just unfolding. Selected on the basis of academic performance, COSMOS students are a microcosm of the vast diversity that is California.

Of course, the core of this program is academic enrichment, and in this area, students have the opportunity to work with talented scholars, researchers, teachers, and university students, becoming part of a multi-dimensional intellectual community where knowledge is shared, passed on, and built upon, stretching the students’ minds and challenging the limits of their curiosity. More than three hundred students participated this year, covering research topics from Engineering of the Automobile, to Robotics, to Simulation modeling, expanding not only their sphere of learning, but also the scope of their ambitions. For while all of these students have demonstrated exceptional talent and interest in science and mathematics, not all of them are aware of the opportunities available to them in the world beyond their families, their friends, and their towns. COSMOS helps students to understand that the only limits to learning are those imposed from within – the doubts, fears, and excuses that can eclipse the illumination of our dreams. It is always a revelation to me when I think about the way that disciplining the mind actually frees the imagination, and I must say that I sometimes envy the excitement these students experience as they begin to explore more fully the expanding universe of their own potential.

But I am also impressed with the way COSMOS gives students the opportunity to expand their social universe, meeting and making friends with other students who share their interests and intellectual potential. In fact, one of the most frequent comments on the program from students is that they were thrilled at the chance to meet other kids like them. And because field trips are an integral component of COSMOS, students are encouraged to mature socially as well as intellectually, and to strengthen the connection between learning and life. It is very tempting to take talented students and apply them mercilessly to the classroom and the lab, believing that the primary purpose of the University is to develop the mind. But just as the root of the word University is Universe, so should the root of all learning be the kind of passion that comes from joining the mind with the world. In this sense, I think COSMOS has the most to teach those of us interested in nurturing intellectual achievement at all educational levels. It is the totality of a student’s experience COSMOS encompasses, and in this way, the program lives up to the grand promise of its name. But perhaps even more importantly, it gives all of us with an investment in education the chance to look, once again, beyond the limitations of our own thinking, looking just for a moment at the expanding universe through the eyes of those who may someday be able to tell us where we came from and where we are going.

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