



The women gathered for a group photo on the beach at Lake Tahoe.

## All-female program encourages the study of science

Lake Tahoe is uncharacteristically unsettled on this late August afternoon, with a sharp breeze cutting across the beach at Camp Galilee on the lake's east shore.

Tahoe's normally placid blue waters churn with small whitecaps, and wisps of clouds seem to be gathering strength in numbers.

And yet, a group of 36 freshmen-to-be at the University of Nevada, Reno couldn't care less.

They are members of the University's Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) program, and they frolic up and down the rocky Galilee beach through a variety of games. They sprint through crazy relay races where they haul kayak oars tied between their legs. They balance single eggs on spoons, miraculously managing to neither (A) break stride nor (B) break the eggs that are in their care. They whoop and holler and delight in each other's company.

Welcome to the beginning of the second year of one of the University's most intriguing efforts—supported by College of Science Dean Jeff Thompson—to match talented young female math, science and engineering students

with a living/learning community designed to encourage their interests in these key areas.

"We've only been together for a few days, and already we're getting along so well," says Jessica Reynolds, an 18-year-old freshman from Minden who plans on majoring in math. "I was hoping that with this program I could work on getting my degree, and also build camaraderie with other students. So far, it's been great."

Nearby, program director Katherine McCall looks to be taking program directorship to a new level. As a young woman, she grew up working at camps on lakes in upstate New York and in Texas teaching canoeing and swimming. She helps the students into kayaks, and gently, yet firmly, instructs them on the do's and don'ts of safety on a day where the water is more choppy than calm.

### New group, same goal

McCall, a longtime Nevada faculty member in physics, has been impressed with this year's WISE cohort, just as she was with last year's group.

"As with any class you have, the feel is different, the dynamics are a bit different," says McCall, during an interview a few weeks after the program's first-week retreat at Camp Galilee. "This group is really serious about their success. They're serious about doing well in school. Twelve of them are in the Honors Program, for example.

"But the point to always remember is that even as the students change, and the composition and the personality of the class changes from year to year, the goal of the program remains the same: We want to create a community of people for our students, a community that they can keep throughout their college years."

By almost every measure, last year's inaugural WISE class was a success. All but one of the students remained in math, science or engineering majors. And, McCall adds, the one student who changed majors is still at Nevada, and is still excited about college.

"What I tell the students and their parents is that if a student changes her major out of the sciences, we want it to be because she found her passion elsewhere. We don't want the reason to be that she didn't feel a sense of community or that she lacked support."

### Removing obstacles

Although they are, as McCall says, serious about their school, there is also a strong sense of *esprit de corps* in the group, a unifying feeling that gender should be no obstacle in reaching their dreams in math, science and engineering.

"There are so few women in these fields," says Ashley Greiman, a freshman from

# Student Success

*“How can you not get excited about a community where you make great friends, and that encourages and reinforces the idea that you should get your degree and then go on to the next great thing you want to do?”*

*freshman Sarah Lillehaug*



Photos by Jean Dixon

*LEFT: Students participated in team building exercises to build community. RIGHT: The WISE students got the opportunity to kayak on Lake Tahoe.*

Green Valley High School in Henderson, who will major in computer and information engineering. Greiman, who admits she “loves” robots and would like to one day design robotic operating systems herself, sees the program’s existence as validation that there is indeed strength in numbers.

“We need all the women we can get in these fields,” she says. “We need to prove we can handle it, and I know all of us will. My mom is a lawyer, but she didn’t have anything like this when she was in school. She is in love with this program, and what it represents—she thinks it’s a wonderful opportunity for me, and so do I. It’s exciting to be a part of it.”

Greiman says she can already see the program’s value.

“I’ve met so many great people here who are already my friends,” she says. “They’re going through the same things I’m going through. And it helps—it really does—when you realize you’re not all alone.”

Prinyan Ka, a freshman from Minden who hopes one day to be a general practitioner,

echoes Greiman. Her first exposure to the program was finding its website, and then feeling surprised with what WISE had to offer.

“I thought it would be good to meet and get to know girls who were into science and engineering and they’d be right down the hall,” says the biochemistry major. “So far, it’s been fun. I like all of the girls in the program.”

## More than just academics

For Sarah Lillehaug, a 17-year-old freshman from Palo Verde High in Las Vegas who will major in biology, the program’s greatest selling point is its human touch. There is no question that all of the students are superior, and many are quite gifted. Yet college can be a challenging experience, both socially and academically. Lillehaug fully expects her involvement in WISE to help her throughout her four years at Nevada.

“It’s just really nice to run into people that have the same interests that you do,” she says. “We’re all clustered here. There is always going to be that common interest and concern of,

‘Well, how did you do on that last chemistry test?’ The idea of having a next-door neighbor (the WISE program is housed in Argenta Hall, on its own floor) with common interests is very cool.”

Lillehaug pauses, taking in the beauty—and the challenge—of the day at Tahoe. She smiles, noting that all of the trees at Tahoe, unlike some of the genus fake-palm tree-icus that line some of the streets in Las Vegas, are real. She says she fully expects her experience in WISE to be equally real, to be equally meaningful.

“How can you not get excited about a community where you make great friends, and that encourages and reinforces the idea that you should get your degree and then go on to the next great thing you want to do?” she says, smiling. ☑

—John Trent ’85/’87, ’00M.A.