

# Non-Traditional Student at SWOSU Completes NASA Accounting Internship

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SWOSU student Diane Fitzsimmons (front row second person from the far right in brown blouse) of Norman was one more than 100 high school and college students who interned this summer at the NASA Kennedy Space Center in Florida. She was one of only two interns in the accounting program.

A Southwestern Oklahoma State University student at Weatherford was one of only two summer interns this year in the accounting program at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

SWOSU senior Diane Fitzsimmons of Norman spent 10 weeks at the space center as part of the federal government's Pathway Programs, designed to introduce students and recent graduates of federal careers. She was among more than 100 high school and college students who interned this summer at NASA in such areas as engineering, accounting, education, administration and public affairs.

Fitzsimmons was assigned to the General Accounting office in the Financial Accounting division of the Office of the Chief Financial Officer at KSC. Her major duty was to work as a purchase requisition approver, checking that each purchase request was completed correctly and included the proper accounting codes needed to track, manage and report on fund use. Purchase requests that Fitzsimmons processed ranged from a few hundred dollars for NASA grants to educators to several million dollars in purchases for the Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle, which is expected to carry astronauts into space in the next decade.

"The internship gave me practical, hands-on experience in government accounting, bringing into reality what I already learned in my government accounting class at SWOSU under Dr. Melody Ashenfelter," Fitzsimmons said. "Even more exciting was having a chance to work with the many NASA professionals – such as accountants -- who work behind the scenes to support America's space exploration program. In a very small way, I got to be part of the missions to return astronauts to the moon and to send humans to explore Mars someday."

Fitzsimmons said her favorite part about the internship was learning all the various aspects of the KSC. The first three to four weeks of her time at NASA was spent going through 26 training sessions with each individual department. She not only learned how accounting fit into NASA but how every department connected with each other. Another interesting part of the program was how segregated the duties are at NASA in order to prevent fraud. The whole program has always stayed extremely protected, according to Fitzsimmons.

Besides working full time, Fitzsimmons and other interns visited many of the NASA work areas, control centers, laboratories, launch pads and museums and they also got to watch a rocket launch.

“My second day there we toured the Apollo Saturn V Center at KSC, and it was a thrill to see the Apollo 10 banner with General Thomas Stafford’s name on it,” Fitzsimmons said. “Most of my classes at SWOSU are in the Thomas Stafford Center, which, of course, is named for the famous astronaut and Weatherford native.”

Fitzsimmons is a non-traditional student who returned to college as her children finish high school. She joked that she was probably the only current NASA intern who remembers the 1969 moon landing.

In order to get the NASA internship, she did weekly searches of national internships for seven months and applied to about 400 summer accounting internships across the nation before landing the NASA position, her third accounting internship. Previous internships were at Hart & Merchant CPAs of Weatherford and the Center for Economic and Business Development (CEBD) on the SWOSU campus. Interestingly enough, both Fitzsimmons and Nick Rymer, a SWOSU intern this summer at NASA’s Langley Research Center, interned during the summer of 2012 at CEBD.

Before graduating in May 2014, Fitzsimmons hopes to secure another internship with a large accounting firm or corporation.

“SWOSU’s business faculty members do a terrific job of preparing us for the workplace, and internships help us practice our skills and give us a chance to prove that we will be reliable entry-level employees,” she said. “I am extremely grateful for all the support and mentorship I have received so that I can reach my career goals. The faculty at SWOSU have been supportive of my dreams every step of the way.”

Fitzsimmons maintains a 3.85 grade point average and was named SWOSU’s Oklahoma Society of CPAs Outstanding Accounting Student this past school year. Her husband, Phillip Fitzsimmons, is the reference and digitization librarian at SWOSU’s Al Harris Library.