



PUBLIC RELATIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Kat Stein
The Franklin Institute
215.448.2375 or kstein@fi.edu

**THE FRANKLIN INSTITUTE SENDING TWO EDUCATORS
TO EXPLORE WEIGHTY SCIENCE ISSUES THROUGH WEIGHTLESS SCIENCE**

**Team Has Met Shuttle Crew Last Friday
Including Philadelphia Native & Shuttle Commander Chris Ferguson**

Philadelphia, PA, July 26, 2011 – The Franklin Institute has sent an engineering teacher from its partnership public high school, the Science Leadership Academy, as well as Franklin Institute staff scientist to be part of a Philadelphia team of educators that are currently at NASA Johnson Space Center’s Ellington Field in Houston. Fourteen teams will be conducting their experiments aboard an aircraft modified to simulate a reduced-gravity environment. The aircraft will fly approximately 30 roller-coaster-like climbs and dips during experiment flights to produce periods of weightlessness and hyper-gravity ranging from 0 g to 2 g. The trip is sponsored by the Department of Energy and the Princeton Plasma Physics Lab’s Science Education program.

Jayatri Das of The Franklin Institute and Matt VanKouwenberg of the Science Leadership Academy will perform planned experiments aboard a microgravity aircraft, which produces weightlessness 18 to 25 seconds at a time by executing a series of about 30 parabolas – a steep climb followed by a free fall – over the Gulf of Mexico. During the free falls, they will be able to gather data in the unique environment and experience near-weightlessness.

“We are excited that our program provides once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for aspiring scientists and engineers and teachers to study and understand their craft. Teachers will gain useful skills to take back to the classroom by participating in the program through collaborative planning and teamwork,” said Doug Goforth, RGSFOP Program Manager.

Das and VanKouwenberg’s team, which includes two other Philadelphia teachers, arrived at Ellington Field, where astronauts do their T-38 training, the day the Space Shuttle touched down. Last Friday, they were able to attend a celebratory ceremony with the Shuttle astronauts, and meet Philadelphia native, Shuttle Captain, and Franklin Institute fan, Chris Ferguson. They have undergone physiological training and fly their experiment this week. Their research will examine the effects of micro-gravity on an internal combustion engine. This experiment will take place during their reduced gravity flights. Following their flight, the team will evaluate findings, draw conclusions and provide the results to NASA.

Jayatri Das is a senior exhibit and program developer at The Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, PA. Das received a B.S. in biology and a B.S. in biochemistry and molecular biology from Penn State University. Awarded a Howard Hughes Medical Institute Predoctoral Fellowship in

Biological Sciences, she earned her Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology from Princeton University and conducted postdoctoral research in biology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Science Leadership Academy teacher **Matt VanKouwenberg** taught for 5 years at West Philadelphia High School, where he won teacher of the year. A founding science teacher at SLA, Matt has been able to take full advantage of his background of a BSE in Chemical and in Biomolecular engineering from the University of Pennsylvania by developing many courses in both science and engineering. After being a Yale National Teaching Fellow, he went on to win the first annual Lindback award for secondary teachers.

Located in the heart of Philadelphia, **The Franklin Institute** is a renowned and innovative leader in the field of science and technology learning, as well as a dynamic center of activity. Pennsylvania's most visited museum, it is dedicated to creating a passion for learning about science by offering access to hands-on science education. Considered one of the great science centers in the nation and the world, The Franklin Institute is known for blockbuster exhibits, one-of-a-kind theatrical experiences, and cutting-edge community learning with national influence. All are aimed at explaining science in ways that impact people's lives. For more information, visit www.fi.edu.

For more information about the Reduced Gravity Student Flight Program, visit the Web site at: <http://microgravityuniversity.jsc.nasa.gov>. Or contact Rachel Kraft at NASA Johnson Space Center's Public Affairs Office, at 281.792.7690. Also, look for updates and photos on The Franklin Institute's Facebook page, [The Franklin Institute](#).

###