Muktha Natrajan was awarded a 2011 Gates Cambridge Scholarship. She is among a group of 30 U.S. recipients selected for the international postgraduate scholarship and is the fifth UGA student to receive the award since 2001. Muktha, who is from Martinez, GA, and was a Foundation Fellow, graduated this spring with a bachelor’s degree in genetics and a master’s degree in environmental health.”Muktha joins a long and distinguished line of UGA students who have enhanced the reputation of this institution with success in these highly competitive academic scholarship programs,” said UGA President Michael F. Adams. The Gates Cambridge scholarship program aims to build a global network of future leaders committed to improving the lives of others. Dr. David S. Williams, Associate Provost and Director of the Honors Program, concluded: “Muktha’s commitment to improving the lives of others is obvious, such as her research on neurodegenerative diseases and her public health work in Namibia.” He added: “Due to her interests in neuroscience and the environment, Muktha is poised to make a profound impact on global health through her work studying the effects of extrinsic factors on neural cell growth and development.” Muktha worked in the laboratory of Dr. Steve Stice since her first year at UGA when she arrived as a CURO Apprentice. She also studied at Nanjing University in China through the National Science Foundation’s Partnerships for International Research and Education and participated in New York University’s Summer Undergraduate Research Program. In the summer of 2010, she served as an intern with the World Health Organization in Namibia. In addition to her Gates Cambridge Scholarship, Muktha also received scholarships from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. Muktha will pursue a career in clinical neuroscience research and public health policy and will most definitely continue to make a positive impact on the world.
Honors Program students Victoria (“Tori”) Akin, Michael Burel and Amar Mirza, have been awarded the 2011 Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship, a national award for undergraduates who intend to pursue careers in mathematics, the natural sciences, or engineering. “I am very pleased that Victoria, Michael and Amar have been recognized as Goldwater Scholars,” said UGA President Michael F. Adams. “At a time when America is producing far too few graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, we are proud that these UGA students are not only studying in those fields, they are excelling.”

Tori, a UGA Foundation Fellow and mathematics major from Macon, GA, began her research activities in epidemiology modeling after her first year at UGA, working under the guidance of epidemiologist and statistician Dr. Andreas Handel in UGA's College of Public Health. She created a computer program that simulates the progression of influenza, gathering data to support more efficient production of antiviral drugs. Last fall, Tori engaged in numerical analysis research with mathematics professor Dr. Jason Cantarella. She has participated in the National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates and presented her research at the CURO Symposium. She teaches math concepts to middle school children through the MATHCOUNTS Outreach Program and taught math and phonetics to young children during a service abroad trip to Tanzania. She would like to obtain a Ph.D. in mathematics and pursue a career in higher education as a researcher and professor.

Michael, a major in cellular biology from Acworth, GA, was first introduced to undergraduate research when he entered UGA as a CURO Apprentice. He immediately started working in the laboratory of Dr. Steve Stice, Georgia Research Alliance Scholar in Reproductive Physiology. He has continued his research with Dr. Stice, and last year was a teaching assistant for the CURO Apprenticeship, offering guidance and support to the new group of Apprentices. Selected as one of two inaugural recipients of New York University’s Summer Undergraduate Research partnership with the University of Paris, Michael conducted research in France last summer, and continued this summer at NYU’s Sackler Institute of Graduate Biomedical Sciences. He has presented his stem cell research at the Institut Jacques Monod in Paris and at the CURO Symposium. Michael plans to pursue a Ph.D. in developmental biology and become a university professor and researcher.

Amar, a major in biochemistry and molecular biology from Hiram, GA, has been working in the laboratory of Dr. Natarajan Kannan since his first year on campus. His research has focused on various aspects of the structure and function of protein kinases, a family of proteins that has mutated in cancer. Amar has presented his projects at several symposia including the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students in 2009, the CURO Symposium, and the annual EXROP meeting in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Amar participated in the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Exceptional Research Opportunities Program in summer 2010 and most recently traveled to Haiti to work in a health clinic during the cholera outbreak. Amar would like to earn an M.D./Ph.D. in molecular biology and pursue a career in genomic medicine.

“I am very pleased for Amar, Michael, and Tori on an individual basis,” said Dr. David S. Williams, faculty representative for the Goldwater Scholarship. “Collectively, they underscore the importance of UGA’s Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities, through which they all have conducted impressive research.”
Sharing Ideas During CURO’s International Symposium

On the beautiful UGA campus in San Luis de Monteverde in Costa Rica’s cloud forest, students from UGA and the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) shared their research, ideas, cultures, and experiences at the five-day International Undergraduate Research Symposium. This was the third time that UGA and UCR have partnered on an interdisciplinary study-abroad research experience. Students presented their research during oral presentation days, held a discussion about Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, and participated in a National Issues Forum on water led by UGA alumna Callie Mersmann. But hiking, bird-watching, farming, and other activities were also on the agenda. As part of a carbon offset program, students participated in a local reforestation project by planting more than 100 trees and shrubs in the Monteverde Mountains. “The CURO International Research Symposium in Costa Rica combined key elements in an Honors education at the University of Georgia—research, study abroad and international civic engagement—into one exciting five-day experience for some of our top students who joined top students from Universidad de Costa Rica,” said Dr. David S. Williams.

Ariana Rojas Downing from UCR stated: “I became touched by this: my very first international experience in the topic I love. It was so amazing to find such incredible people and being able to learn, share and make relationships with academics and students from different cultures and environmental realities. Our common goals made us feel like a family: to do our best to contribute to our society and our environment. It wasn’t only an intercultural encounter but also interdisciplinary. Most of the issues we tackled showed that we are living in a globalized reality. However, it is marked and divided by different policies, behavior, and habits from each country. The symposium demonstrated how unity and teamwork allow us to keep working towards the great challenge of achieving social and environmental goals with the biggest impact. These types of encounters and events inspire people to continue visualizing a better, equitable, healthy and even more sustainable world. I feel that the initiatives for research presented at the symposium became like the beginning of a new era, where the next challenge is to implement our proposals and improve them.”
"I was very gratified to have the opportunity to lead a group of Foundation Fellows on a trip to India, a wonderful country with a rich and diverse history, and one that is becoming increasingly prominent on the contemporary geo-political map. The academic theme of our trip was the interaction of Hindu and Muslim cultures in pre-modern India and the ways in which the chronology of that interaction can be mapped at the various architectural sites in Northern India. The students prepared for the trip by reading a biography of the first six Mughal emperors of India (15th/16th centuries) and reading some supporting scholarship on architecture, along with viewing an Indian biopic on the life of the greatest of these emperors, Akbar. We visited sites in Delhi that traced the development of the earliest Islamic settlements in Hindu India, sites in the Udaipur area that evidenced the dominant Hindu princely state and its conflicts with the Islamic conquest of India, and also sites in Delhi and Agra that showcase the unity and beauty of the two cultures coming to accommodation with each other. It was a unique experience for me to share my passion for pre-modern India, and indeed, my love for my country of origin with such a bright, inquisitive, and talented group of UGA students."

—Dr. Kalpen Trivedi (Director, UGA at Oxford)

"India has a rich history and cultural tradition, and our whirlwind trip around Delhi, Agra, and Udaipur allowed us a small but eye-opening glimpse into the fantastic world of the Mughal emperors juxtaposed with the realities of modern-day India."

—Jacob Rooney '12

"The incredible and living vibrancy of India's history that was captured in the temples, tombs, forts, and palaces we visited was still somehow equaled by the tumultuous modernization of Indian society that surrounded us wherever we went. We marveled at the architecture and jeweled inlays of the Taj Mahal and then contemplated the vast juxtapositions outside its walls presented by a traditionally agrarian population of over one billion people rapidly acquiring wealth and technology."

—David Zweig '12

“One of the memorable parts of the trip was wandering around the Taj Mahal, gazing at its marvelous walls aglow with the morning sun, soaking up its majesty and my own wonder that I was actually there. Even more unreal was a personal invitation from the head priest of the Adinath Jain temple, who brought us aside into a marble alcove and prayed for us with a beautiful chant that echoed throughout the airy, elaborately-carved columns."

—Phoeny Li '11
Since my first days in the Honors Program I considered studying abroad, but I did not expect to find myself spending an entire year studying in the People’s Republic of China. After receiving a State Department Critical Language Scholarship and a United States Boren Scholarship, I was set for an exciting trip to China to study Mandarin Chinese and research China’s growing environmental crisis. I spent the majority of my time studying in Nanjing, Kunming, and Harbin, which are located in three different corners of China. As my language skills improved from talking about my favorite color to discussing the complexities of the Communist Party, my experience abroad became more rewarding. While my primary goal was to be immersed in Chinese language, being immersed in Chinese culture was just as important. Of particular interest to me was China’s tea culture. Existing for centuries, tea culture has thrived and evolved over the years from a luxury reserved for the emperor to a common part of everyday life. In addition to experiencing tea culture, I also took interest in traditional Chinese music. While in Nanjing, I noticed a man who played erhu (a violin-like, two-stringed, traditional Chinese instrument) outside of my dorm every day. I would often talk with him and attempt to play his erhu. Upon arriving in Kunming, I decided to purchase an erhu and take lessons. I continued my studies in Harbin, playing solo pieces and in ensembles with my Chinese roommates. My new musical skills also came in handy for my research. In order to collect survey responses, I would go to a nearby park and play erhu. As soon as people saw a foreigner playing erhu, a crowd would begin to form, and I would play on as I distributed surveys.

One of the most rewarding experiences of my time in China was spending two weeks in my roommate’s hometown for the celebration of the Chinese New Year. Located in rural Anhui province, the unnamed, impoverished village is home to fewer than 300 people, almost all with the last name “Wang.” His village, never before visited by foreigners, highlights the stark contrast present in China. Upon arriving there, it becomes difficult to imagine that the megacities of Beijing and Shanghai even exist. Unlike the major cities of China, his village still observes the traditions that have existed there for centuries—particularly those related to the Chinese New Year. I vividly recall the morning of the New Year. Just before sunrise, I was awoken by the sounds of firecrackers. Soon after, the village loudspeaker echoed with the sounds of the national anthem, encouraging all good citizens to “rise” and “march on.” When we finally did rise that morning, we dressed in our best clothes and went to every home in the village, wishing everyone a prosperous year. From roasting pig head to venerating ancient ancestors, the celebration was steeped in traditional culture. Preparing to return to the United States, I boarded a train in Harbin bound for Beijing. As the train jolted back and forth over the tracks, I couldn’t help but think about how this year had been a jarring experience. Studying abroad in a developing nation under one-party rule is difficult. My year in China shook the foundation of my beliefs and challenged my understanding of the world on a daily basis. China, government, freedom, society, justice, the United States, international responsibility, history—I was forced to reconsider all of this while taking into account the Chinese perspective. Whether observing the military raise the Chinese flag over Tiananmen, engaging in a debate over the merits of the Communist Party, hiking along the North Korean border, or living with Tibetans in a mountain village, this past year was an extremely rewarding experience I’d be happy to share more about with anyone over a cup of tea.

Logan Krusac ’12 is from Acworth, GA, and is majoring in Chinese, Political Science, and Spanish.
Yasmin Yonis, a native of Somalia, is the sixth consecutive Honors student to receive the Merage American Dream Fellowship, which is awarded annually. Yasmin, who is from Lawrenceville, GA, graduated this May with degrees in international affairs and journalism. She is one of 10 national winners of the Merage Fellowship, which provides up to $20,000 over a two-year period to academically outstanding undergraduates who are immigrants to the United States. Yasmin was also awarded a 2010 Truman Scholarship. Yonis and her family came to the U.S. when she was three years old as refugees from the civil war in Somalia. “The Merage Fellowship speaks to the best of the American spirit,” said UGA President Michael F. Adams. “Yasmin and her family fled the turmoil in Somalia to seek the opportunity promised in America, and she has made the most of that opportunity. Her determination to serve others in the throes of human rights crises is inspiring, and I look forward to following her career.” “Yasmin is one of those rare students who not only impress me, but also inspire me,” said Dr. David S. Williams. “She would be the first to say that living in the United States gave her the experiences and the resources to be an agent for positive change in the world, so to receive an award in recognition of her ‘American Dream’ is very appropriate and meaningful.” With her personal history as the driving force, Yasmin took advantage of a wide range of opportunities at UGA to prepare for a career in human and civil rights law and public policy working with marginalized communities in the U.S. and abroad. She served as opinions editor of the Red & Black student newspaper and wrote columns and institutional editorials, and she interned for Voice of America through the Honors in Washington Program. Yasmin also traveled to Ethiopia’s Somali region where she worked as an intern with Mercy Corps, an international aid organization focused on disaster response, sustainable economic development, health services, and emergency and natural disaster relief. With additional interests in public policy, Yonis completed research addressing African women’s empowerment through UGA’s Roosevelt Institution Scholars Program, which is sponsored by the Honors Program, and as one of the inaugural participants in the Carl Vinson Institute of Government Fellows Program. She participated as one of only 10 law fellows selected nationwide in the University of California’s 2010 Public Policy and International Affairs Junior Summer Institute. Yasmin also served in leadership roles in the community as the political action chair of the Black Affairs Council at UGA and as a tutor for students of color. She established a mentoring program for African-American girls at an Athens middle school and mentors Somali-American high school students in Atlanta. Yasmin is currently applying to law school while working in Washington, D.C.
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In Search of Salamanders

For the fourth consecutive year, a University of Georgia undergraduate has been named a recipient of the Udall Scholarship. Todd Pierson, a second-year Honors student and Foundation Fellow, was one of 80 recipients of the national award, which recognizes sophomores and juniors who are pursuing careers in environmental or Native American issues. Todd, who is from Zionsville, IN, is majoring in ecology. “UGA’s recent success in the Udall Scholarship speaks both to our students’ concern about and focus on environmental issues and the institution’s commitment to research, teaching, and public service in that area,” said UGA President Michael F. Adams. With the goal of combining a research and teaching career focused on ecological conservation, Todd has been conducting amphibian ecology research since he started at UGA. Todd has worked in the laboratory of Dr. John Maerz in the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, who has been recognized for excellence in undergraduate research mentoring by CURO. Todd has also worked as a researcher, photographer, and database contributor under the guidance of Dr. John Pickering in the Odum School of Ecology. Todd has taken his ecology interests abroad, becoming involved in a research partnership between the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala and the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, Berkeley. With travel-study funds provided as part of his Foundation Fellowship, he has traveled to the highlands of Guatemala, to Oman, and to the United Arab Emirates, where he collected and studied new species of amphibians and reptiles. “Todd is already an accomplished environmental scientist, having worked abroad to describe a new species of salamander,” said Dr. David S. Williams. “Impressively, he is sharing his passion by helping to host programs for school and community groups to highlight the importance of amphibians and reptiles, encouraging the next generation of students to embrace biodiversity.”