Shelley Lee Koch, of Overbrook, a doctoral student in sociology, was one of 27 students honored by University of Kansas sociology department for achievements in the 2008-09 academic year. Koch was named as a recipient of the Morris C. Pratt Travel Scholarship. The scholarship provides expenses related to doctoral work and recognizes longtime supporters of the discipline of sociology and those who advocate social justice. Recognition ceremonies were May 15 and 16.
Colleges lure math, science majors to teaching

By ALAN SCHER ZAGIER

Teaching science wasn't exactly a top career goal when Brent Hartley entered the University of Kansas.

The lifelong astronomy buff figured he'd work in a lab after graduation, or maybe for NASA, the federal space agency. Among many of his fellow budding scientists, the old maxim held true: Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

"As a student, I always thought a teacher's job was a piece of cake," said Hartley, a senior from Olathe.

That perspective quickly changed once Hartley got a taste of leading a classroom, thanks to an expansive program designed to lure math and science students into teaching careers.

Students enrolled in the new UKanTeach program, one of 14 pilot projects on campuses nationwide, can dabble in the discipline as freshmen or sophomores with a one-credit course that includes a handful of teaching tryouts in elementary and junior high schools.

Those who choose to continue — and most do — can earn teaching certificates along with degrees in their chosen majors. Unlike the traditional, five-year School of Education track, this program takes just four years, though recipients don't receive master's degrees.

The university even offers a money-back guarantee, paying a $200 rebate to students who complete the introductory sessions.

"It's an opportunity to explore," said Steve Case, a former high school science teacher who now helps lead the Kansas effort as assistant director of the university's Center for Science Education. "They can decide at the beginning of their experience whether teaching is for them."

The KU program, begun in 2007, relies on a $2.4 million grant from the National Math and Science Initiative, an Exxon Mobil-backed charitable foundation. Thirteen other campuses received similar gifts, including California-Berkeley, Florida State, Northern Arizona, Temple and Louisiana State.

The newer programs are modeled after UTeach, a decade-old effort at the University of Texas in Austin that now sends more than 70 secondary math and science teachers into the work force each year. That's double the number produced before the program started.

"You're recruiting students who have a love of the subject matter," said John Winn, a former Florida state education commissioner who serves as a NMSI program officer oversees the college teaching academies. "And you're offering them a bargain — they never have to sign on the dotted line that you swear to become a teacher."

In Austin, no such oath is necessary. Eighty-five percent of the program's graduates opt for teaching careers. After five years, 70 percent of the UTeach alumni remain on the job, compared to a national average of just 50 percent.

Campus leaders, in Lawrence predict exponential growth. There, 110 students participated in UKanTeach in the recently completed spring semester, a more than threefold increase from the program's start in fall 2007. The number is expected to exceed 300 in another two years.

Case credits the early success to an aggressive recruiting effort. Letters touting the program are sent to incoming students. UKanTeach routinely visits freshman orientation and introductory science classes. On the grass-roots front, there are YouTube videos and colorful messages written in sidewalk chalk on campus walkways.

Some of the most effective ambassadors are students themselves.

Megan Fowler, a rising junior from Fredonia, came to Lawrence intent on attending medical school. An introductory chemistry course quickly removed that notion.

Now she hopes to teach high school chemistry. But if that doesn't pan out, she anticipates that come job-hunting time, her KU chemistry degree will retain its value.

"Teaching was always something I was interested in, but I didn't want to do the School of Education thing," she said. "If I got into teaching and didn't like it, and had an education degree, then what was I going to do?"

The training programs recruit experienced high school teachers to offer real-world expertise along with instruction
on the art of teaching. These clinical professors, dubbed “master teachers,” are also expected to stay in touch with program graduates and offer support and advice as the new teachers find their way.

Margie Hill joined the KU faculty after 35 years as a public school teacher and administrator in Kansas City and Overland Park. With many of her former teaching peers nearing retirement, the 60-year-old Hill wants a role in preparing the next generation.

“They can get the philosophical stuff out of a book,” she said. “We can tell them how it really works.”

Skeptics note the lack of research data measuring whether teaching academy graduates are more effective than their traditionally trained peers, or if their students learn more. Teaching academy leaders say those results will be apparent over time.

In largely rural Kansas, convincing young professionals to live and work in small towns is as much of a challenge as finding qualified instructors, said Pam Coleman, director of teacher training and licensure for the state education department.

She expects the UKanTeach program to increase retention, citing the Texas model.

“We’re very excited about this program,” she said. “We anticipate the same kinds of rewards and successes in Kansas.”

— AP