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Biology Professor Receives NIH Grant to Continue Heart Development Research

Quick Facts

- The \$419,115 grant continues through June 2013.
- Evans-Anderson came to Winthrop in 2008.



Heather Evans-Anderson

ROCK HILL, S.C. - Sea squirts may seem insignificant, but their impact on Assistant Professor of Biology **Heather Evans-Anderson's** research career has been tremendous.

The **National Institutes of Health (NIH)** has awarded Evans-Anderson a **\$419,115 grant** to aid her ongoing research on cardiac myocyte, or muscle cell, proliferation. The project featured in the grant focuses on how the hearts of sea squirts, which are marine-dwelling invertebrates, can repair damaged muscle cells of their hearts. She examines the genes that direct this repair process in sea squirts, or *Ciona intestinalis*, in an effort to define the evolutionarily conserved mechanisms that, eventually, can translate to mammals.

Cardiac myocyte repair in these invertebrates contrasts strikingly with mammalian hearts, which have all the myocytes they'll ever have at birth and cannot repair or replace these cells later in life, **Evans-Anderson** explained.

The grant, her first independent **NIH grant**, will allow the biologist to hire a new technician for her lab, supply stipends for undergraduate students as well as a graduate student and provide supply money to support the research. The grant will continue through June 2013.

Evans-Anderson, who has studied heart development since her years as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University, worked closely with students in her lab, including Elizabeth Walker '10. Walker successfully defended her thesis on the evolutionarily conserved mechanisms of heart development in sea squirts. **Evans-Anderson** also worked with five undergraduate research assistants who presented their work at a variety of scientific conferences in spring 2010. Collaborating with students, she said, has been a positive experience that she hopes will "spread some of the enthusiasm for science" her own professors gave to her.

She said she's extremely proud of her grant, since it received the highest score of any grant on Cardiac Differentiation and development study section at NIH.

"This is a particular honor for me. I thought that my colleagues in the field would think I had lost my mind deciding to go into sea squirts, but it turns out it was the opposite," she said.

Evans-Anderson joined the Winthrop faculty in 2008. She earned her Ph.D. in biomedical science at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine in Columbia, S.C., and her B.S. in biology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.

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