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Currents

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Program Update ([Gemini Opportunity Survey Results](#)): Readers responded to a short survey in the [last issue of Currents](#), with the great majority in favor of increased US participation in Gemini. Comments received in the survey raise many important issues, such as the importance of public access to large telescopes, how to ensure aperture balance in the System, and achieving a closer alignment between Gemini capabilities and US community needs.

GSMT Update ([Toward Public-Private GSMT Partnerships](#)): Recent letters from the Giant Magellan Telescope and the Thirty Meter Telescope projects reiterate their interest in federal participation in the construction and operations phases of their observatories. The opportunities for public involvement in GSMT—from planning the science, to the instruments, operations modes, and the archiving of GSMT data—will be discussed at the meeting “Science with Giant Telescopes: Public Participation in TMT and GMT” (15-18 June 2008 in Chicago). We encourage all interested members of the US community to attend the workshop and make their views known.

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In this Issue

[Program Update](#)

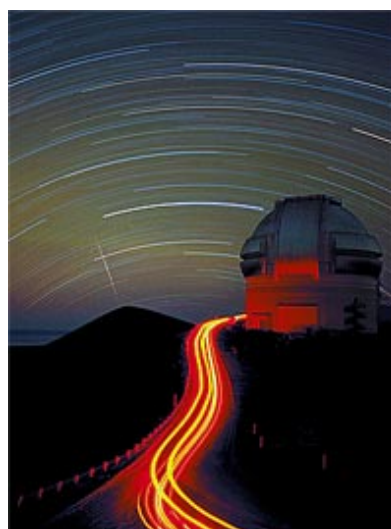
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Gemini Opportunity Survey Results

In the last issue of *Currents*, we asked readers to respond to a survey regarding the potential opportunity for increased US participation in Gemini. The survey was motivated by the expectation that the UK will want to sell some of their Gemini nights. We asked two questions: should the US buy additional nights, and should the purchase be done in a way that would increase the US share of Gemini. We also gave readers the opportunity to send in text comments to explain their answers or make related points.

As of May 9, we received 62 survey responses, with the great majority in favor of increased US participation in Gemini. The tally of survey responses is as follows:



Gemini North
Gemini Observatory/NOAO/AURA/NSF

1. Bearing in mind that any purchase will need to be accompanied by a marginal budgetary commitment, is there a strong need for the US to

acquire additional nights on Gemini and should this be set as a high priority for NSF?

Yes: 51

No: 10

No Response: 1

2. Is there benefit in seeking to acquire these through an additional share of Gemini as an alternative to simply buying nights?

Yes: 51

No: 8

No Response: 3

Comments received in the survey expressed a variety of opinions and raised many important issues, such as the importance of public access to large telescopes, how to ensure aperture balance in the System, and achieving a closer alignment between Gemini capabilities and US community needs. Some of those who replied “No” to both questions commented that they could not support buying more time unless they knew what would not get funded as a consequence. Most of those who replied “Yes” to both questions and who submitted comments stated that they thought that the community need for more access to 8-meter time was substantial.

One respondent answered affirmatively based on the philosophy of open community access to 8- to 10-meter aperture telescopes, commenting, “I am concerned that many of the largest telescopes (Keck, Magellan, MMT, Subaru) are essentially in private hands and accessible mainly to astronomers with special privileges based on their institution of employment. I think more democratic, fair access to such telescopes is appropriate for the USA.”

Another respondent commented that, “Becoming a larger shareholder in Gemini makes sense, given the reinvestment in smaller telescopes. Balance is the key to providing the broadest access to the full range of telescope apertures needed for breakthrough science.”

Other respondents were interested in looking for a balance of investment in Gemini and other large telescope facilities. One respondent commented that it was important to ask, “Should Gemini be a higher priority than continuing to support or expand the TSIP program (and getting more Keck time instead!)?”

Comments that referred to the second question either said that they endorsed the future commitment that an increased “share” would imply or that they thought that this would be a way to assure closer alignment between the needs of the US community and the capabilities and performance that Gemini provides. One respondent commented, “It would be nice to see a more coherent management structure and more involvement by the national centers in the running of Gemini and setting priorities for upgrades — not even just for new instruments, but for getting the ones they have working!”

Another commented, “Buying an additional share of Gemini gives the US more bargaining power to influence the design of the next round of Gemini instrumentation, for instance. Buying time provides no influence on decisions affecting Gemini’s future performance.”

This survey provides valuable input both to the immediate question of acquiring more Gemini time and to the longer term issue of Gemini’s role within the US ground-based optical/infrared system. This last point has been a subject of much discussion recently. NOAO has been working with the Gemini Observatory and the AURA Board and member representatives to address issues such as those identified

in the survey. NOAO has charged a committee, Access to Large Telescopes for Astronomical Instruction and Research (ALTAIR), to understand the capabilities that will be needed on 6.5- to 10-meter telescopes in the 2010-2020 time frame in order to meet the scientific aspirations of the community. As the large telescope equivalent of the ReSTAR committee, ALTAIR will investigate and recommend how both Gemini and the non-federally funded telescopes fit into this picture. Look for announcements of opportunities to provide input to this committee in *Currents* and in the NOAO *Newsletter*.

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Toward Public-Private GSMT Partnerships

[The Giant Magellan Telescope](#) (GMT) and the [Thirty Meter Telescope](#) (TMT) projects have recently released letters reiterating their interest in federal participation in the construction and operations phases of their observatories. These letters and the associated responses from AURA [are available online](#).

As the designated national [Giant Segmented Mirror Telescope \(GSMT\) program manager](#), AURA/NOAO welcomes this continued interest and looks forward to further discussions with the projects, the National Science Foundation, and the open access community. Significant access for the community at large remains one of our highest priority goals, as first articulated in the last Decadal Survey.

Active involvement by the community is now needed on GSMT topics such as: planning and executing science programs; specifying and constructing instrumentation; modes of operation; time allocation; integration into and coordination with the full system of US astronomical facilities; and the processing, archiving, and public distribution of data products. These topics will be discussed at the upcoming meeting "[Science with Giant Telescopes: Public Participation in TMT and GMT](#)" (15-18 June 2008 in Chicago). There is still time to register for this meeting. Other opportunities to participate in such discussions will be announced in future issues of *Currents* and the NOAO *Newsletter*.



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Contact Us

Did something interesting, inspiring, or surprising happen on a recent observing run? Please tell us about it! Is there a topic that you would like to see covered in a future *Currents*? If you are planning a regional astronomy meeting or department internal symposium, would you like someone from NOAO to give a presentation on our new program? Please contact us at currents@noao.edu. We look forward to hearing from you!

Currents is a sparkplug for communication between NOAO and our community. It provides updates—and solicits community input—on NOAO observing opportunities and NOAO programs and policies on a more rapid timescale than is possible with the quarterly NOAO *Newsletter*.

NOAO is the national center for ground-based nighttime astronomy in the United States and is operated by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA), Inc. under cooperative agreement with the National Science Foundation.

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