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Carleton College physics phenom wins Churchill Scholarship, is headed to Cambridge

By Christopher Magan
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Computers got Michael Coughlin interested in physics, and now he's hopeful that studying abroad will bring him a more collective approach to research.

"The way science is done over there is much different. It is more collaborative," the Burnsville native said. "I expect to learn a lot from that experience."

Coughlin will graduate from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., in June with a double major in physics and mathematics. He recently was named a Churchill Scholar and will spend the next academic year studying at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, where he intends to earn a master's degree.

Coughlin studies gravitational waves, tied to Albert Einstein's relativity theory of gravity. Coughlin looks at how objects such as stars interact with black holes in deep space. He became interested in computer-aided research as a student at Trinity School at River Ridge in Eagan, an interest that blossomed at Carleton.

"We did a lot of different computer-modeled experiments," he said. "That really turned me on to it."

The Churchill is a prestigious award, and the last time a Carleton student won the honor was in 1998. Elizabeth Ciner, director of student fellowships at Carleton, said Coughlin is a deserving recipient.

"This is one of the hardest awards to get," Ciner said. "We are very happy for Michael. It really is a great recognition of the work he has done and a great reflection on the terrific work of our students and faculty."

Ciner

describes Coughlin as "wonderfully Midwestern" and unassuming. He says he's humbled by the honor of being able to study with some of the world's great scientists.

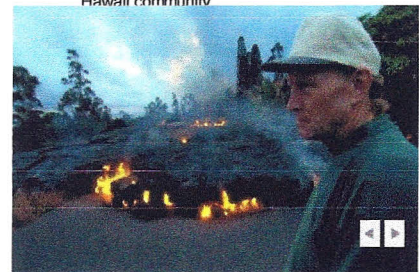
"I was completely shocked," he said. "In general, people who win this are leaders in their field. It is kind of crazy."

Physicists from Sir Isaac Newton to Stephen Hawking have studied at Cambridge, making



Michael Coughlin of Burnsville is a Churchill Scholar at Carleton College. (Courtesy Photo)

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Coughlin's upcoming year that much more intriguing and intimidating.

"It is incredibly exciting and completely terrifying at the same time," he said, noting a feeling of wanting to live up to expectations.

Coughlin hopes to draw a lot from the collaborative-research approach at Cambridge before returning to the U.S. to earn his Ph.D. He hasn't decided between Harvard or the California Institute of Technology.

Either way, Coughlin plans to keep exploring

the mysteries of space and gravity.

"I don't see myself as a professor, but I love working with other people and other students," he said.

Christopher Magan can be reached at 651-228-5557. Follow him at twitter.com/cmaganPiPress. Read our blog Ahead of the Class at blogs.TwinCities.com/education.

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