

Astronaut will be FAU's first grad to fly on shuttle

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Friday, June 08, 2007

Florida Atlantic University is hitching a ride into space today, courtesy of a 1986 graduate who is the first alumnus to man a shuttle mission.

Fightin' Owl Steven Swanson, who earned a master's degree in computer science from the Boca Raton school, will carry an FAU flag with him on his 11-day mission to attach solar arrays to the international space station.

It's the maiden space voyage for both Swanson and FAU.

While the University of Colorado, another of Swanson's alma maters, has 18 space shuttle alumni, having a bona fide spacewalking astronaut from FAU brings a special prestige for the young university still growing its computer and science programs.

"We are so proud of the fact that we can say an astronaut is a graduate of our university," said Brenda Coto, director of development for the College of Engineering. "It shows the quality of our program and the things you can achieve through an education at FAU."

Swanson, 46, is a native of Colorado and got his bachelor's from the University of Colorado. After graduating from FAU, he earned a doctorate in computer science from Texas A&M University.

He was unavailable for comment Thursday. NASA shuts down interviews a few weeks before blastoff, which is scheduled for 7:38 p.m. today from Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral.

The mission, aboard shuttle Atlantis, includes six other astronauts. NASA flight engineer Sunita "Sunni" Williams, who has been aboard the space station since December, will return home on Atlantis.

During the trip, astronauts will unfurl new solar arrays to generate more power for the space station. Solar arrays are groupings of solar thermal panels or photovoltaic modules.

After the solar array is installed, Swanson will make a spacewalk to work on a joint that helps it move, and he'll troubleshoot any problems.

"The biggest thing they tell you is that it's a fantastic experience, and don't forget to take a second when you can look around, look at Earth. It's the best view you're going to get," Swanson said in an interview posted on NASA's Web site. "The No. 1 thing they tell you is to enjoy it a little bit and look around."

Swanson said he had not thought about becoming an astronaut until graduate school. The exploration part appealed to him, and he likens space travel to camping.

"You have to be thinking ahead, what's going on, what's going to happen, and you have to be somewhat cautious and don't want to go out without the right equipment," Swanson said in the NASA interview.

The FAU flag that Swanson will carry was specially ordered for the mission and has been hermetically sealed in plastic.

When it returns to Earth, FAU will frame it, and it will hang in the new alumni center when the building is completed.

"He is an inspiration to his fellow alumni and current students," Pat Breman, associate vice president for alumni relations at FAU, said of Swanson . "I think everyone at the university feels great pride."