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White House honors UC Merced professor

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MERCED -- A University of California at Merced professor has been recognized by the White House for his research in computer simulation.

Shawn Newsam, an assistant professor in the School of Engineering, was one of 56 researchers selected for the 2006 Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers. The honor comes with \$50,000 per year for five years to help Newsam's research.

"I was surprised. It's something you don't initiate yourself, so it was a surprise to receive," said Newsam, joking that he was given the "early career" award at age 39.

Newsam joined UC Merced in 2005. Before that, he worked at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. A colleague from the lab nominated Newsam, who described the professor's work as "groundbreaking."

The presidential award is for those who have accomplished innovative research and community service. It's the highest honor bestowed by the U.S. government on young scientists and engineers.

Nine federal departments and agencies nominate scientists and engineers for the honor. Newsam was one of eight tapped by the Department of Energy.

The White House announced the 2006 winners last month.

Newsam pursued engineering because he was good at math and science.

"I went into image processing and computer visuals -- getting computers to understand images the way humans can do," he said. "I had a strong interest in photography all my life."

The world has seen so many technological advances that there's a lot of data developing more quickly. Newsam's research looks for ways to turn that data overload into something useful.

"Collecting satellite imaging is no good if you don't have anyone to look at it," he said. "We're overwhelmed by all this data."

Newsam said working at a university is what motivates him.

"It's a great environment. You can pass knowledge on to students. You can explore research problems with more freedom, and it's interdisciplinary. You can work with scientists of various disciplines," he said. "This is the job I was working toward."

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