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Framingham State University's Christa McAuliffe Center is reborn as a 21st Century interdisciplinary facility following nearly \$8 million renovation

Grand Reopening is scheduled for January to correspond with the 38th Anniversary of the Challenger Accident

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For Immediate Release

FRAMINGHAM – When you walk into the Christa McAuliffe Center's newly renovated planetarium these days, you are just as likely to find health studies students meditating under the stars, or art students reviewing their original creations on the dome, as you are to find an astronomy class deeply engaged in discussion on the origins of the universe.

This is the interdisciplinary vision of McAuliffe Center Director Irene Porro brought to life, following a major renovation that recently wrapped up at the facility, located in O'Connor Hall on Framingham State University's campus.

"The new Center is designed to serve students across all disciplines, not just in the sciences," says Dr. Porro. "It allows us to serve a wider audience, and in particular, more current FSU students."

The McAuliffe Center was created in 1994 as a way to honor FSU's beloved alumna Christa Corrigan McAuliffe '70, the First Teacher in Space, who died in the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. It includes a Challenger Learning Center – a fully immersive learning environment where thousands of students of all ages engage in simulated space mission each year – a Planetarium and other multi-function spaces.

"The renovation work allowed us to highlight another key goal of the Center," says Dr. Porro. "We leverage the unique perspective of seeing planet Earth from space to bring attention to the environmental changes our planet has suffered and to inspire the creative thinking we need to deal with the climate crisis."

The state provided nearly \$5 million to redesign and modernize the aging facility. The University also received federal funding, and grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the Massachusetts Skills Grant program to pay for the project, which cost nearly \$8 million in total.

Students from around Massachusetts will resume taking field trips to the McAuliffe Center in February and FSU faculty have already begun exploring new ways to use the facility.

“All of our new spaces are multifunctional,” Dr. Porro says. “The mission control room in the Challenger Learning Center is a modern computer lab that could be used to host climate preparedness simulations or models of the stock market. The only limit is our creativity and imagination.”

The McAuliffe Center also provides paid internships and part-time employment to 11 current FSU undergraduate and graduate students.

“Christa famously said ‘space is for everyone’ and so this new facility honors her legacy by allowing us to further expand the programs and resources offered here to all of our students, whether they are studying the arts, humanities, business or hard sciences,” says FSU President Nancy Niemi. “I’m grateful to the legislature – and particularly our local delegation, including Senate President Karen Spilka – for funding this important project.”

The McAuliffe Center is home to one of 35 Challenger Learning Centers. Collectively reaching hundreds of thousands of students each year, Challenger Center and its Challenger Learning Centers carry on the legacy of the Challenger STS 51-L Crew, using experiential STEM education programs that bring STEM subjects to life and inspire students to pursue STEM careers. The McAuliffe Center’s partnership with Challenger Center started in 1994 with the installation of our original Challenger Learning Center. In collaboration with Challenger Center, that original simulator was removed, and a newly designed Challenger Learning Center experience was installed at the McAuliffe Center. The new Challenger Learning Center includes the same core spaces - Briefing Room, Mission Control, and Spacecraft – but features all new fixtures, hardware, software, audio/visual equipment, graphics, and student interactives, to meet the needs and expectations of learners of today.

Grand Reopening celebrations will be held the last weekend in January leading up to the 38th Anniversary of the Challenger accident on January 28th. It will include:

- **Friday, January 26th** from 10:30 a.m. to noon: A private event with state and local officials, McAuliffe Center staff, FSU administrators, and the President and CEO at Challenger Center.
- **Saturday, January 27th** from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.: An open house for the community to tour the new space, take in a show at the Planetarium, enjoy a Performance of Octave of Light, with Multiverse Lecture Series, and explore the Challenger Learning Center stations and labs under the direction of the Center’s flight directors.
- **Sunday, January 28th** from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.: The community is invited to take part in a day of remembrance, which will be focused on Christa and the rest of the Challenger Crew. A moment of silence will be held at 11:39 a.m., which is the exact time of the accident. An original piece of music composed by David Ibbett and written in honor of Christa will also be performed.

To learn more, visit <https://cm-center.org/events>

About the Christa McAuliffe Center for Integrated Science Learning

The Christa McAuliffe Center is a vibrant educational facility established in 1986 to honor the legacy of the first teacher in space, Framingham State University alumna Christa McAuliffe '70. Today, the Center functions as a hub for much of the University’s informal STEM education activity and outreach serving students and educators across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and beyond. Since 1994, the Center has been serving between more than 12,000 K-16 students every year. The Center hosts the only Challenger Learning Center in Massachusetts, a digital planetarium and an exhibit hall. Framingham State is the first higher education institution to integrate a Challenger Learning Center on its campus.