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By Carmelle Druchniak
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DURHAM, N.H. -- The universe takes no time-outs, as University of New Hampshire space scientists learned last week.

An international gamma ray astronomy symposium hosted by the UNH Space Science Center was interrupted last week by the detection of a "whopper" gamma ray burst, just the sort of celestial phenomenon scientists from around the world had gathered to discuss.

UNH Physics Professor James Ryan was paged during dinner with colleagues and hurried to his campus office to learn more about the event. And the data continues to come in from the COMPTEL gamma ray telescope, an instrument aboard NASA's Compton Gamma Ray Observatory and operated by UNH. Ryan directs the COMPTEL program.

"We get a few of these a year and wouldn't you know that we get one during the meeting," says Ryan. "Between the gamma ray burst and the X-ray transient -- another event that occurred last week -- we had all the scientists we needed to figure out what to do or what we could do."

Gamma ray bursts produce more energy in a very short period than the rest of the universe combined. Their energy, says Ryan colleague Mark McConnell, "is second only to the Big Bang," the event many scientists believe triggered the creation of the universe.

This particular gamma ray burst occurred just out the field of view of the COMPTEL instrument, but was detected nevertheless, says McConnell. Data was then available for review 15 to 18 minutes after the first signal.

The gamma ray burst is one of the larger events detected by COMPTEL, says Ryan, occurring in the constellation Camelopardalis. "As it turned out, some optical astronomers were clamoring for a more precise location that we tried to provide under the circumstances. We'll find out later if there are any good

optical follow-ups to see how far this thing is away from us."

Based on its size, he adds, it should be relatively close, cosmologically speaking, "maybe only a few billion light years."

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