

## NEWSROOM

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## READY. SET. RESEARCH.

## COMMUNITY CAPTAINS STEM PROGRAM CREATES COLLEGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGH SCHOOLERS.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | September 6, 2024*Read time: about 3 min*

Over the summer, Aiden Grissom temporarily morphed into his future self: a college student heavily involved in challenging, scientific research.

Grissom, a senior at Heritage High School in Newport News, got a glimpse of what it's like to be on a college campus, engaged in work that has the potential to be groundbreaking. He was one of four Newport News high schoolers chosen to be part of the six-week Community Captains Summer STEM Research Program (CC-STEM).

"It was an amazing opportunity," Grissom said. "I worked with great people and learned a lot."

CC-STEM is an offshoot of [Community Captains](#), a signature Christopher Newport program that collaborates with Newport News Public Schools to expose students to collegiate life in hopes of encouraging them to continue their studies at either CNU or another college or university.

Focusing on in-demand STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, CC-STEM affords selected Community Captains the chance to do paid college-level research while still in high school. High schoolers are paired with CNU professors conducting work on topics that interest them. From there, they are engaged in research for six weeks.

“It provides an invaluable experience,” said Brandon Jones, director of Community Captains and co-director of CC-STEM. “It’s not only paid, but it’s a great resume builder. It’s a great opportunity for them to learn, while preparing them for life after high school. For me, the development and growth they experience is most important.”

Part of CC-STEM’s mission is to create an atmosphere where students become acquainted with different STEM majors and fields as a way of broadening their horizons.

And that’s exactly what happened with Grissom and his CC-STEM peers.

Grissom spent the summer working to program a robot simulator to navigate a set path in a virtual “home.” As he focused on setting the robot on a path of success, he too was finding a new path, one that stimulated interest and excitement about a field in which he had previously known very little.

The CC-STEM project opened his eyes to all of its possibilities and exposed him to a career track that was most enticing.

“I loved it,” Grissom said. “It was very interesting.”

Andrea Santos, a senior at Menchville High School, was equally positive about her research. She worked with Dr. Jessica Burket, assistant professor of biology and neuroscience, in a neuroscience lab studying the effects novel compounds have on schizophrenia in mice.

“It’s definitely been a fun experience,” Santos said. “I got a lot out of it.”

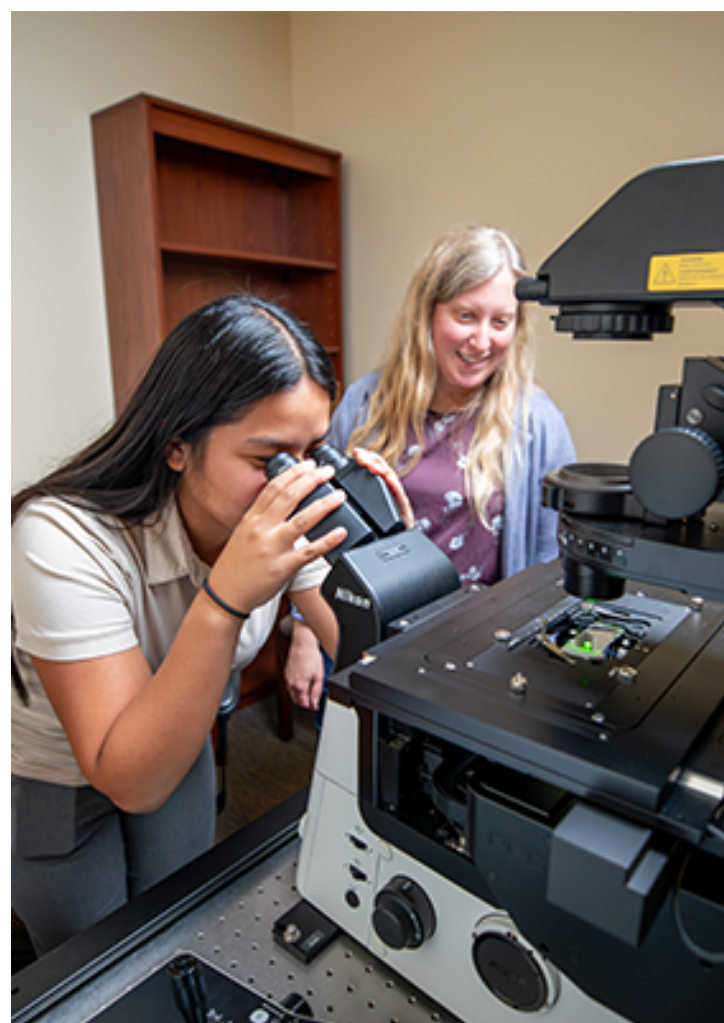
Like Grissom, Santos realized through her CC-STEM work where her passion lies, and what career path she wants to pursue. She is now considering a pre-med major in college.

“It helped me determine what I want to study,” she said. “Before, I was unsure if I wanted to do neuroscience. Now, I definitely feel like it is a field that is interesting to me.”

The partnership that CC-STEM fosters between high schoolers and college professors and students has proven beneficial on many levels, Burket said.

“The CC-STEM program is so important to providing an opportunity to the high school students to not only interact with a professor but also to gain hands-on training next to CNU summer research students involved in different projects,” she said. “This allows for peer-to-peer interaction and stimulates summer discussions on the research and topics of college preparation, engagement in research during college and overall future career goals that may have additional meaning to a high school student coming from an undergraduate student perspective.”

The program, in its third year, aims to fortify students’ research experiences, readying them for a career world that is focused on STEM jobs. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, there were nearly 10 million workers in STEM occupations in 2021, and that [total is projected to grow by almost 11% by 2031](#), more than two times faster than the total for all occupations.





“Hands-on research experiences provide them with knowledge and exposure to the scientific field. They can take their experiences with them anywhere they go, and with whatever they decide to pursue,” said Dr. Kathryn Cole, co-director of the CC-STEM and associate professor in the [Department of Molecular Biology and Chemistry](#).

Grissom was connected with Dr. David Conner, associate professor of [Computer Science](#). Conner served as Grissom’s mentor, instructor and liaison to the college world.

Conner said the research “gave Aiden confidence that he can tackle open-ended problems and not just ‘textbook’ problems.”

The experience pushed Grissom outside of his comfort zone. At the same time, it brought into focus educational and career opportunities that are within his reach.

“I knew nothing, from the software I was using to the simulator I was researching,” he said. “After reading and learning, I did a lot of problem solving in regards to the simulator I was working with.”

At the end of the six weeks, the CC-STEM students present their research, explaining what they did and the findings it produced.

Speaking with confidence during his presentation, Grissom was excited about his research and eager to share what he learned with professors and peers.

“The experience was frankly wonderful, being able to work with experienced professionals in the research field was great,” he said. “The flexible, relaxed work day led to a lot of good work getting done.”

As he begins his senior year, Grissom does so with a sense of accomplishment and excitement. He is hoping to attend college and major in computer science or intelligence analysis with a minor in robotics.

CC-STEM, Grissom said, built a foundation he anticipates building upon as plans for his future.

“It just really gave me a better perspective on how I wanted to move on after high school,” he said. “I think it’s a great opportunity and I wish everyone could get this experience.”