

Observer

Winter Park / Maitland

Invest in STEM education for minorities

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Guest Writer

Here's an equation that's simple to solve. This year, America's graduating high school seniors face a job market that still hasn't recovered to pre-recession levels. Meanwhile, demand for skilled



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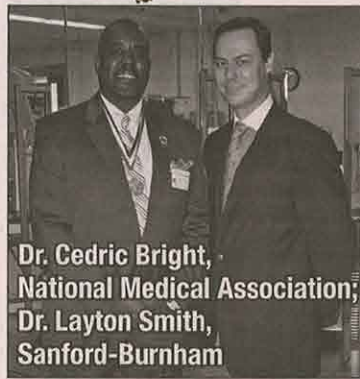
individuals in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers grew three times faster than those for non-STEM jobs in the last 10 years, according to the Department of Commerce. Crunch the numbers and the answer is clear. We must provide students with the opportunities and tools to pursue these careers — which pay, on average, 26 percent more than non-STEM occupations. Moreover, we can't afford not to — because generating these ideas, companies and industries is the only way to compete in a globalized, knowledge-based economy.

Yet by many accounts, the U.S. is lagging behind its counterparts in terms of STEM education. Equally concerning is

the lack of diversity of students entering STEM educational programs and career fields. Minorities — particularly African Americans — are woefully under-represented in areas such as computer networking, medicine, engineering and physical sciences. The problem has several sources, including an inadequate educational foundation during middle and high school, lack of financial resources for college and low awareness of STEM-related careers. Simply put, we're missing out on a significant segment of students who could otherwise lead promising careers — and propel our nation into the future.

That's where the STEM Pipeline Program comes in. Recently launched by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), Sanford-Burnham Research Institute at Lake Nona, Central Florida Medical Society, and the law firm Akerman Senterfitt, this collaborative partnership of private businesses and nonprofits aims to increase the interest of minorities in science-related fields.

Working with Orange County Public Schools to identify promising candidates, the program will provide students with resources at every aspect of the educational pipeline — including hands-on experience in lab research, mentoring opportunities



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and career counseling. STEM professionals will visit classrooms to inspire and engage students. And qualified students can earn a four-year scholarship toward a STEM major — removing a major hurdle to a college education. The scholarship includes paid internships for four summers at Sanford-Burnham, one of the nation's leading organizations dedicated to furthering the understanding of health and disease.

The pipeline program makes common sense. It not only directly addresses the shortage of workers in these careers; it provides an advantage to talented students

who otherwise wouldn't have considered these options. And, as technology continues to pervade daily life and restructures occupational fields, these skills will be valuable for every member of the workforce — not just mathematicians and scientists.

The initiative is about more than simply meeting a need for workers. It's also about igniting passion in young men and women to achieve fulfilling, purposeful careers. It's about telling them, "You have the intelligence and drive to accomplish great things." That's a message too many students have never heard before. And it's one that can change the course of their lives.

It's time to level the playing field — both for the U.S. among its global competitors, and for minorities who deserve this opportunity to succeed. It's time to make a tangible investment in the students who will lead us into the future. The STEM Pipeline Program is an initiative whose time has come — and I couldn't be more proud to be involved.

Sherry Paramore is area development director for UNCF. For more information on the STEM Pipeline Program, or to find out how to become involved, contact her at 407-896-6940.