

Virgin Islands Youth Excel in Prestigious STEMMPREP Project, Preparing for Careers in Science and Medicine

Jonathan Tucker and Naitik Jhanwar join the ranks of past STEMMPREP graduates making a difference in medicine and engineering. Their work in cancer research and infectious disease prevention paves the way for future scientific advancements

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From left to right, Jonathan Tucker and Naitik Jhanwar.

Two Virgin Islands students excelled during the 2024 STEMMPREP Project Summer Internship, which focuses on science, technology, engineering, math, and medicine (STEMM). The STEMMPREP Project, organized by the Distance Learning Center (DLC), offers underrepresented minority students the opportunity to work alongside scientists and doctors,

gaining hands-on experience in their chosen fields.

Jonathan Tucker, a ninth grader from Charlotte Amalie High School, and Naitik Jhanwar, also in ninth grade from All Saints High School, participated in the seven-week research internship at the University of Pennsylvania from June 22 to August 10, 2024. During the program, they were mentored by university faculty and post-doctoral fellows, engaging in a curriculum that included weekly career seminars, tours of Pennsylvania colleges, and field trips to local landmarks. The internship culminated in a presentation of their research findings to their peers, mentors, and family members.

Jonathan's research focused on comparing Killer Immunoglobulin-like Receptor Chimeric Antigen Receptor (KIR-CAR) T cells with standard CAR-T cells, which are currently used in cancer therapies. "I acquired wet-bench research skills to help me in my desired career path in immunology," Jonathan said of his experience. Meanwhile, Naitik focused his research on studying Enterococcus found in the human gut, aiming to combat infectious diseases. Reflecting on the internship, he remarked, "It gave me a lab experience that I can never forget."

According to the release, the STEMMPREP Project has been instrumental in shaping the careers of past participants, many of whom have gone on to work as physicians, researchers, IT engineers, and allied health professionals at institutions such as Stanford University, Sloan Kettering Cancer Research Hospital, and ProHealth Urgent Care.

With the conclusion of this year's program, the application period for the 2025 STEMMPREP Project is now open. The DLC is seeking high-achieving 7th, 8th, and 9th graders from underrepresented minority groups for a seven-week internship set to take place at the University of Washington in Seattle and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Interested applicants must have maintained an "A" average over the past three years, submit a letter of recommendation from a STEM teacher, provide the previous year's standardized test scores, and write an essay explaining their interest in pursuing a career in science. Applications are due by February 15, 2025, and more details can be found at thedistancelearningcenter.org.

Charlene Abramson Joseph, the senior recruiter for the STEMMPREP Project in the Virgin Islands, praised the program's long-term impact on students. "It is imperative that Virgin Islanders are provided the opportunity to participate in this groundbreaking program whose mission is to foster sustained interest in STEM and direct underrepresented minorities toward STEM careers," she said.

The program's success is supported by local organizations such as the VI Lottery, and Joseph is encouraging any group or individual interested in contributing to the project to contact her for further information.