

Community Foundation grant supports LaPREP program

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PHOTO CAPTION: LaPREP students build rockets as part of the program's hands-on math, science and technology curriculum. LaPREP is part of a pipeline that encourages minority, female and low-income students to pursue math and science careers.

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SHREVEPORT, LA -- LaPREP, an LSU Shreveport program that nurtures the next generation of scientists and engineers, is growing as it approaches its 30th anniversary.

Founded by LSUS math professor Dr. Carlos Spaht in 1992, LaPREP is the original STEM education program. It's touched more than 830 students directly, with a ripple effect as many of them become first-generation college students.

The Community Foundation is again helping the program with a gift of \$63,750 for LaPREP's programs in 2020.

"LaPREP has been in existence for over 25 years and has consistently provided a high-quality and inspiring learning experience for students," said Liz LaBorde, the Community Foundation's chief grants officer. "Programs like LaPREP provide two major benefits: dramatically improving the life trajectory of individual students and strengthening our community by building a more educated workforce."

Dr. Spaht says LaPREP wouldn't exist without this kind of support.

"The cost of LaPREP and the entire group of programs is \$200,000, a small price tag for the results LaPREP can claim," Dr. Spaht said. "I'm so thankful the community has helped us so much."

Dr. Spaht and other instructors share their love of math and science with minority, female and low-income middle school students in hands-on summer classes. The program is keeping kids in school: no LaPREP graduate has dropped out of high school, and every one of LaPREP's graduates has enrolled in college.

This extraordinary impact was made possible in large part by AEP SWEPCO's generous gifts over the years.

"SWEPCO and the AEP Foundation have been long-time supporters of the LaPREP program. Our initial \$600,000 contribution created the Endowment Fund that currently provides on-going funding for the program," said Michael Corbin, SWEPCO's external

affairs manager. “We have continued to support LaPREP over the years and are excited to see the young men and women from our community complete the program in preparation of joining the workforce. Congratulations to Dr. Spaht and the staff for a job well done.”

LaPREP has earned numerous accolades, including awards from the Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, and the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Foundation. Dr. Spaht’s commitment was recognized in 2007 with the nation’s most prestigious teaching award, the United States Professor of the Year.

Spaht is committed to mentoring young minds. He connects current LSUS students with youngsters who dream of college but don’t know how to get there. Dr. Spaht’s students often work as program assistants, sharing not just their love of learning but encouragement and real-world advice.

“We’ll have 70 to 80 percent of LaPREP participants some years that would be first-generation college students,” Dr. Spaht said. “We want them to know they have the ability to be successful in college.”

It all started with a boy named Tony, a bright, popular eighth-grader at Caddo Middle Magnet School in the 1980s. Tony’s teacher bragged to Spaht about the boy, who was succeeding despite a challenging background.

“One day, I ran into that teacher, and she told me, ‘Tony dropped out of school. He got involved with a gang, and he’s on drugs’,” Dr. Spaht recalled. “I said, ‘I’ve got to do something to stop this’.”

In the past decade, LaPREP has reached out to even more students with Get Set for LaPREP and LaPIXEL. Get Set for LaPREP helps elementary school students prepare for LaPREP. LaPIXEL teaches LaPREP graduates the fundamentals of visual effects software. LaPREP graduates are also eligible for scholarships to LSUS.

The LaPREP program curriculum focuses on basics, but it’s evolving to include topics like cybersecurity in response to emerging technology fields. It’s also helping students get a taste of healthcare careers through a partnership with the JUMPSTART program at LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport.

“A little more than 80 percent of our LaPREP graduates have been majoring in math or science,” Dr. Spaht said. “With LaPREP and its associated programs, students now have the opportunity to participate in educational programs from the beginning of the 5th grade all the way through high school and into college. No other program in our area is able to provide all of these benefits that LaPREP and its related programs do.”

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The LSUS Foundation promotes philanthropic support for LSU Shreveport programs and areas of study while recognizing the all-important growth and success of economic development in northwest Louisiana. The LSUS

Foundation houses 58 endowed professorships and chairs and awards over 150 scholarships each year.

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