

FEF FOCUS

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President's Message: Forging a Brighter Future

The McKnight Fellowship Program has always striven to facilitate opportunities for Fellows to network, collaborate, and grow—both professionally and personally. Our gatherings and conferences are where research partnerships and lasting relationships flourish. In this edition of *The Focus*, we share a powerful story of how Drs. Pamela Wisniewski and Karla Badillo-Urquiola, two McKnights, built a life-long mentor-mentee bond that has helped them achieve their goals. Their journey, recognized at an Annual Fellows Meeting, began at UCF and has since blossomed into a shared commitment to support each other's quest to earn tenure and promotion and prioritize their students' active learning. This is just one example of how McKnight cultivates a community that extends far beyond the Fellowship itself, creating lasting connections that continue to impact the academic world.



Drs. Pamela Wisniewski and Karla Badillo-Urquiola

Indeed, one of our highest Program aspirations has been to have a critical mass of graduates and former Junior Faculty Fellows like Wisniewski return to our Conferences, form such connections, and share insights gained on their professional paths. You'll read here about this year's Orientation keynote speakers, Fellowship alumni Drs. Sylvia Thomas and Micah Johnson, distinguished scholars and high-ranking university administrators, who embody this vision. They now come back each year as role models for McKnight matriculates and alumni. You also will read about another 13 valuable mentors who have developed nurturing relationships with Fellows and will be recognized at our 2024 Annual Meeting for their role in guiding students toward success.

Another mission of the McKnight Program is to create pathways for Fellows to pursue fields where their representation is substantially below national averages. We proudly share stories about our triumphs in these areas, especially when a female excels in a field where she is traditionally not expected to have an interest, let alone thrive. The Nella Delva story demonstrates, in no uncertain terms, the significant results that ensue when FEF uses its resources to open doors for females in STEM and individuals from financially limited backgrounds. Nella's impressive achievement as a researcher representing the United States as a Fulbright Scholar exemplifies the impact of this support. Her story illustrates how genius exists in every sector of our society but too frequently goes unrecognized, leading to lost potential. It clearly shows the importance of the McKnight Doctoral Program in diligently identifying these talents and helping them grow, develop and lead in society's advancement.

You also will read here a compelling story about Fellow Royce Pokela, who molded his curriculum and sought research experiences to propel himself into a deep space career. A 2024 Ph.D. graduate, Pokela now develops aircraft technology as a NASA aerospace engineer.



*Dr. Lawrence Morehouse
President & CEO*

Our story, however, does not begin or end with our McKnight Fellows. In fact, when we initiated our Ph.D. program, we also established pipeline programs to prepare promising students for college and advanced degrees. Thus, this edition of *The Focus* also highlights consequential stories from those programs.

For example, once again, the 2024 seniors in our National Achievers Society attained a 100% graduation rate, and those students have gained admissions to the best colleges in Florida and throughout the nation. Our FEF CodeMasters program continues to seek every opportunity to ensure underserved Florida students get access to early and high quality exposure to technology education through after school and summer programs and by visiting partner venues to teach the power of computer programming. Our Centers of Excellence emphasize the importance of academic achievement, while also pushing our Achievers to serve and lead in their schools and communities—mentoring students, working with police departments to ensure neighborhood safety, serving disabled veterans, and providing relief for hurricane victims.

As we reflect on our Fellows' achievements and the accomplishments of our pre-college students, we are reminded of the transcendent impact that opportunity, mentorship, and community support can have on shaping lives. Our scholars, with their dedication and passion, are not just advancing in their own careers, they are paving the way for future generations, breaking barriers, and creating a ripple effect that will resonate for years to come. The McKnight Fellowship and its pipeline efforts are more than programs: they are a transformative journey that inspires excellence, nurtures leadership, and fosters a commitment to service. Together, we are building a legacy that extends far beyond the walls of academia, and we look forward to the next chapter in this incredible story—one of continued empowerment and progress, as we forge a brighter future.

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Mentorship Goals: McKnight Alumni Drs. Pamela Wisniewski and Karla Badillo-Urquiola

The world of academia can often be a lonesome one, which is one of the reasons the mentor-mentee relationship between Doctors Pamela Wisniewski and Karla Badillo-Urquiola is so unique and powerful.

Both Wisniewski and Badillo-Urquiola overcame many challenges throughout their youth.

Pamela Wisniewski was born in Gainesville, Florida, from a Chinese immigrant and white American background. Isolated from her extended family, she survived abuse at home by finding solace at school.

Education became her sanctuary, so it was only natural that she pursued higher education, exploring a few different fields before eventually settling on decision and information sciences at the University of Central Florida. Though she initially joined the workforce following graduate school, a series of unfortunate events led Wisniewski to follow her passions and pursue her doctorate in computing and information systems at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. After accepting the position of Assistant Professor of Computer Science at UCF, Wisniewski found herself struggling without mentorship in a field she found unwelcoming as a female minority. Fortunately, in 2017, she was able to use her McKnight Junior Faculty Fellowship to focus on publishing papers and gaining her footing in the academic world. It was then that she met her student, mentee and friend, Karla Badillo-Urquiola.

Only a few hours away from Wisniewski's birthplace, Badillo-Urquiola was born in Orange County, Florida. Raised early on by her single mother and later her step-father, Badillo-Urquiola also endured a difficult home life with domestic violence and divorce.



Dr. Pamela Wisniewski

Throughout her challenging upbringing, she was taught education comes first because "no one can take away your knowledge." Initially interested in psychology, Badillo-Urquiola eventually pivoted to computer science

with a focus on community-based work, especially human-computer interaction research. As a doctoral student at UCF, Badillo-Urquiola was encouraged to meet then Assistant Professor Wisniewski by a colleague who saw the similarities the two possessed. Badillo-Urquiola attended a lecture by Wisniewski and, after arranging a second meeting, hit it off with her soon-to-be mentor. Meanwhile, Wisniewski

confesses that her future mentee was one of only three people who attended her lecture at a school where her colleagues disparaged her research, claiming it was not "real science." The two connected over their focus on studying underserved communities' relationships to technology with an emphasis on children and teens, as a result of their troubled upbringings.

Throughout her time at UCF, Wisniewski helped Badillo-Urquiola navigate not only her doctorate but also her personal life, earning an MDF Jones Most Valuable Mentor Award, nominated by Badillo-Urquiola in 2019. She was there for Badillo-Urquiola throughout her pregnancy and early parenthood during the pandemic, offering advice from childcare, to how to avoid burnout, to facing colleagues challenging her research. As another woman of color exploring the human side of computer science, Badillo-Urquiola also experienced comments on her dissertation, asking where her algorithm was or insinuating she was in the wrong department. But with the support of her professor and the McKnight

Doctoral Fellowship, Badillo-Urquiola went on to graduate in 2022 with an impressive job offer already on the table: tenure track assistant professorship at the University of Notre Dame.

Now both at prestigious private universities, with Wisniewski accepting the position of Associate Professor in Human-Computer Interaction and Flowers Faculty Fellow in Engineering at Vanderbilt University in 2022, both professors continue to support each other in their lives. The two talk daily about their triumphs and struggles as both parents and professors. Badillo-Urquiola notes that she can now relate to how Wisniewski felt as a minority woman professor, noticing how even the students at private universities seem to challenge their authority on the subject of computer science.

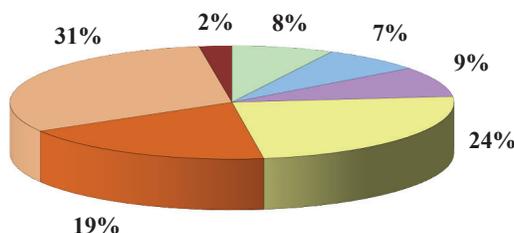
Even now, with both Badillo-Urquiola and herself boasting impressive curriculum vitae full of published papers and awards, Wisniewski maintains that her mentoring work is the most important thing she does as a professor. Rather than focus on the rampant posturing in academia, she says: "I'd rather serve my students and do good work... I care about Karla more than how many papers she publishes. I want to do whole person mentorships where I am helping them become better as people and researchers."



Dr. Karla Badillo-Urquiola

Badillo-Urquiola heartily agrees, saying that Wisniewski taught her how to be her authentic self to her students. Though she admits she may not quite follow in Wisniewski's footsteps regarding mentoring, that is because Wisniewski helped her be true to herself in both research and otherwise.

McKnight Doctoral Fellowship Graduates (1,090)



Discipline Breakdown

- Business (81)
- Education (80)
- Humanities (94)
- Social Sciences (265)
- STEM-Engineering/Computer Sciences (205)
- STEM-Health/Life/Physical Sciences (339)
- STEM-Mathematics/Statistics (26)

MDF Profiles in Performance: NASA Scientist Royce Pokela and Fulbright Scholar Nella Delva



Royce Pokela

Royce Pokela figured out his calling in aerospace technology early in life. His grandfather, a former aircraft mechanic in the U.S. Air Force, instilled in him a love for aviation and space launch systems. It helped that he grew up in Palm Beach County, just two hours south of Cape Canaveral and that his parents, a teacher and administrator in the public school system, were supportive. His three older brothers all went to college but only he pursued graduate school.

Pokela has studied mechanical engineering since first enrolling as an undergraduate at Florida State University. Although FSU doesn't have a program that targets aerospace engineering, Pokela took aerospace classes offered in mechanical engineering. He also worked as an Undergraduate Research Assistant at the High Performance Materials Institute (HPMI), a major multi-university project funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that advances technologies critical to human exploration in deep space. Because of HPMI, Pokela was able to conduct independent research for his honors thesis and write a conference paper as first author. He also learned about areas critical for space flight—material science and manufacturing.

Pokela praises Florida State University for giving him “the desire to study [engineering] for the rest of my life.” He is now a three-time FSU alumnus with the completion of his Ph.D. in mechanical engineering this November, having already earned bachelor's (with honors) and master's degrees in the same discipline. At each stage of education, Pokela's participation in the field widened as his knowledge deepened.

As a McKnight Fellow, Pokela became a Graduate Research Assistant at the Florida Center for Advanced Aero-Propulsion. In its “exceptional” facilities, he conducted experimental aerodynamics research focused on high-speed flows. He tested new models aiming to develop additional techniques to better understand high-speed fluid dynamics, improve computational tools, and lead to progress in developing “supersonic commercial flight, safe and reusable space flight, and next generation defense technology.”

Last May, Pokela became a Research Aerospace Engineer at NASA Langley Research Center, where he helps develop next generation aircraft and space technology for the Space Launch System and Revolutionary Vertical Lift technology. Having a very positive experience there poses quite the dilemma for him, he says, and he now questions which love he should ultimately pursue—research or teaching.

When Nella Delva was 15 years old, she and her 16-year old sister immigrated from Haiti to the United States without their parents, seeking political asylum and better education opportunities. Though Nella quickly learned English and assimilated to the predominant culture, she never relinquished “the complex beauty and resilience” of her homeland, which she credits for her creativity, resourcefulness, and determination. In Haiti, she has explained, she learned to compensate for limited resources; creativity wasn't an option but a necessity.

In high school, Delva took biomedical and environmental magnet courses alongside English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) classes, and grew enough academically to tutor other ESOL students in science and math. Within a six-year period after high school, Delva had earned a bachelor's degree at Barry University as well as a post-baccalaureate certificate and master's degree at the University of South Carolina in biological sciences.

Delva immersed herself in research starting as a sophomore at Barry by participating in the Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (MBRS-RISE) program and continuing with the NIH Post-Baccalaureate Research Program (NIH PREP) at the University of South Carolina. These experiences were just two among many that broadened her research skills while sparking her interest in neuroscience and cancer biology.

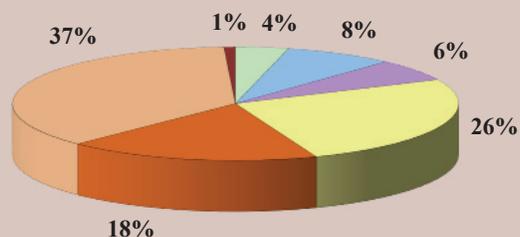


Nella Delva

For her doctoral program, Delva chose biomedical sciences at Florida State where the scientists' interests mirrored hers. For her dissertation, Delva unravels the cellular and molecular mechanisms whereby dopamine influences mood-related behaviors. Through her research, Delva hopes to help fight major depressive disorder, which affects one in six people in the United States and “produces the greatest reduction in health” compared to other debilitating chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis. This year, Delva has been writing her dissertation while conducting research as a Fulbright Fellow at the Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine in Berlin, Germany.

Mentors have played a critical role in Delva's success. Particularly for minority students, she says, appropriate academic mentors can be hard to find. She advocates using LinkedIn and social media to find mentors, having multiple mentors, maintaining those relationships, and becoming a mentor. As she ends her doctoral journey, Delva says, “I still want to help educate and mentor first generation American minority students by sharing my story and experiences.”

McKnight Doctoral Fellowship Matriculating Fellows (365)



Discipline Breakdown

- Business (14)
- Education (29)
- Humanities (23)
- Social Sciences (95)
- STEM-Engineering/Computer Sciences (67)
- STEM-Health/Life/Physical Sciences (134)
- STEM-Mathematics/Statistics (3)

New McKnight Fellows Find Inspiration for Rigorous Ph.D. Journey at 2024 Orientation

In August, the 2024 new McKnight Doctoral Fellows met in Tampa at the annual New Fellows' Orientation, themed "The Ph.D. Experience: Expectations and Realities." The event laid the groundwork for their doctoral journeys, offering valuable guidance, networking opportunities, and the foundation for future collaborations.

Diverse Research Goals and Collaborative Potential

Fellows arrived with research interests ranging from engineering and health sciences to social justice and environmental issues, with many identifying shared goals and complementary expertise. In the biomedical field, Miguel Martinez, who applies AI in cancer research, and Alexandra Reid, who studies brain cancer immunotherapies, revealed potential synergies in their work. In environmental science, Akili Ligons, studying the effects of microplastics on coral reefs, and Rosanyely Santana, examining biodiversity challenges in coastal ecosystems, may one day connect over their concern with conservation. In education, Ria-Skylar Brooks' focus on resilience among African American students found parallels with India Woods's exploration of higher education access for the underserved. Both aim to shape policies that support student retention and well-being, a goal enhanced by their combined perspectives.

Insightful Panels and Mentorship Discussions

The Fellows benefitted from rich conversation during the annual Graduate Deans' Roundtable, where deans Dr. Adrienne Stephenson from Florida State University, Dr. Ruth Bahr from the University



The Graduate Deans' Roundtable, with Drs. Adrienne Stephenson, FSU; Alla Mirzoyan, FIU; Ruth Bahr, USF; Nicole Leeper Piquero, UM; Murielle Gammons, UF; and Jennifer Parham, UCF

of South Florida, Dr. Murielle Gammons from the University of Florida, Dr. Alla Mirzoyan from Florida International University, Dr. Jennifer Parham from the University of Central Florida, and Dr. Nicole Leeper Piquero from the University of Miami discussed strategies for success. Many Fellows praised the "intense Question and Answer session" for allowing open discussion, noting the "confidence boost" that came from hearing directly from an "all-female diverse panel." The deans shared actionable advice, stressing the importance of fine-tuning writing skills, seeking mentorship and exercising persistence.

The MDF Panel: The University Experience featuring Dr. Stephanie Rosado, a McKnight alumna from USF; along with four current Fellows, Ms. Nella Delva, FSU; Mr. Kworweinski Lafontant, UCF; Ms. Maria Moreno, USF; and Mr. Brandon Sosa, FIU, gave attendees a candid view of the challenges and rewards of doctoral study. New Fellows highlighted the discussion as "insightful" and appreciated

the panel's emphasis on well-being and guidance on balancing personal issues with academic demands. The panelists' openness about their own journeys provided "tangible examples" of the road ahead, making the session both relatable and motivating.

Inspiration from Keynote Speakers

Keynote speakers Dr. Micah Johnson and Dr. Sylvia Thomas left a strong impression. Dr. Johnson, an MDF alumnus and then a faculty member at the University of South Florida, offered moving testimony, describing his inspiring journey from teen homelessness to earning his Ph.D. at the University of Florida to landing a tenured position late this year at the University of California at Los Angeles. He challenged Fellows to see their personal stories as strengths, urging them to remain resilient and committed to their work. His message resonated deeply, emphasizing that their unique backgrounds are vital assets in making impactful contributions in academia and society. Dr. Thomas, Vice President for Research and Innovation at the University of South Florida, shared compelling data and statistics with the Fellows, underscoring that as Ph.D. scholars, they belong to an elite group reaching an academic milestone achieved by only a small fraction of people in the world. Reflecting on her work in biomedical engineering and innovation, she encouraged them to harness their research to address pressing societal concerns.



Dr. Micah Johnson

Diverse Academic Backgrounds Fueling Innovation

The 2024 Fellows earned their bachelor's and master's degrees from universities across Florida and around the nation, bringing a wealth of knowledge in psychology, engineering, public health, creative writing, education, and more. This breadth of expertise can activate a collaborative environment where diverse research methods and disciplinary perspectives can intersect. Such an interdisciplinary mix has potential to drive innovation, push the boundaries of research, and address complex societal issues, advancing understanding across a range of fields.

Building Strong Foundations

The Orientation's focus on intense study, persistence, networking, and community underscored the importance of strong focus and reliable support systems throughout the Ph.D. journey. Equipped with insights from faculty, administrators, and advanced Fellows, the 2024 McKnight Doctoral Fellows were well-prepared to begin their academic journeys with purpose, connection, and an eye toward effecting transformative impact.



Dr. Sylvia Thomas

FEF Awards a Record Number of Dr. William R. Jones Most Valuable Mentor Awards

To acknowledge the importance of mentors to the McKnight Program's success, FEF annually invites Fellows to nominate university faculty and staff for William R. Jones Most Valuable Mentor Awards. The Awards are named in honor of one of the first laudable McKnight mentors, the late Dr. William R. Jones, a former FSU faculty member and founding director of the University's Black Studies program. Awards recognize and applaud individuals who have made profound impacts in the lives of their mentees, fostering personal and professional growth.

According to the Council of Graduate Schools, selecting an effective mentor/advisor tops a relatively short list of "promising practices" that help enable doctoral students to earn their Ph.D.'s. An effective mentor incorporates many of the following practices noted by Columbia University. S/he (1) knows and imparts the proper sequence of courses and degree requirements; (2) directs students to research policies and training; (3) outlines evaluation criteria; (4) helps students develop research skills and methodologies; (5) pays attention to development of writing, conceptual analysis, oral presentation, and teaching skills; (6) works closely with students to define viable dissertation topics and creates appropriate dissertation committees; (7) introduces advisees to the professional norms and expectations of their disciplines; (8) helps students consider ethical implications of their research; (9) facilitates networking for their mentees at conferences and other professional gatherings; and (10) treats students as apprentice researchers, teachers, and colleagues.

Valuable mentorship goes beyond this professional guidance; it also fosters personal growth and resilience and helps mentees navigate challenges, overcome obstacles,



Dr. William Haley



Dr. Ladda Thiamwong



Dr. Ronisha Browdy



Dr. Laura Reid Marks



Dr. Milena Neshkova



Dr. Keri Watson



Dr. Murielle Gammons

and achieve milestones perhaps unimagined or thought unattainable.

This year, FEF has awarded a record number of Jones Awards to an exciting array of mentors. Fellows' nominations for the following awardees are a testament to the lasting impact one person can have on another's life:

Dr. William Haley (USF, Aging Studies) nominated by Rio Tate for modeling excellent teaching and connecting him to key individuals, organizations, and other resources.

Dr. Ladda Thiamwong (UCF, Nursing) nominated by Eunice Ojo for encouraging her research and presentations, co-authoring her peer-reviewed journal article, and guiding her to produce five publications.

Dr. Ronisha Browdy (FSU, English) nominated by Bridgette Sanders for selecting her to co-present at a conference, helping her win a conference travel award, and joining her dissertation committee at a crucial time.

Dr. Laura Reid Marks (FSU, Medicine) nominated by Nicholas Reese for securing funding and academic resources for him and his lab mates, advocating programmatically, and offering emotional support.

Dr. Milena Neshkova (FIU, International and Public Affairs) nominated by Majorie De la Cruz for meeting weekly, reviewing her work, helping with grant applications, and referring relevant readings and other resources.

Dr. Keri Watson (UCF, Art History) nominated by Keidra Daniels Navaroli for inviting her to co-write an award-winning textbook, nominating her for UCF's prestigious Order of Pegasus, and recommending her for a manager position on an academic journal.

Dr. Murielle Gammons (UF, Director of Graduate Student Support and Engagement), nominated by Paola Sullivan for creating a culture of belonging, advocating for marginalized students, and consistently encouraging her.

Dr. Beatriz Reyes Foster (UCF, Anthropology) nominated by Trinity Johnson for stepping in as her dissertation chair at a critical time, offering support in moments of personal loss, helping integrate losses into her work, and guiding her research.

Dr. Erin Saitta (UCF, Chemistry) nominated by Kathleen Lugo Charriez for training her to teach effectively, guiding her to publish, and supporting her decision to write her dissertation completely bilingual.

Dr. Laura Kohn Wood (UM, Education and Human Development) nominated by Guerdiana Thelomar for providing teaching experiences, empowering several publications, enabling national and international presentations, and introducing her to renowned scholars.

Dr. Justin Kennemur (FSU, Chemistry) nominated by Nath-Eddy Moody for supporting diversity in polymer chemistry and cultivating positive interactions in the lab that lead to enlightening research.

Dr. Maxine Jones (FSU, History) nominated by Sabrina Shade for advocacy, guiding her scholarship, and shaping the next generation of scholars in history.

Dr. Rachel Grant (UF, Journalism) nominated by Nikki Lyons for encouraging her to present in the United States, Europe and Australia and showing grace and encouragement while guiding her research during a stressful period in her life.



Dr. Beatriz Reyes Foster



Dr. Erin Saitta



Dr. Laura Kohn-Wood



Dr. Justin Kennemur



Dr. Maxine Jones



Dr. Rachel Grant

2024 NAS Seniors Continue to Meet FEF's High Standards

Once again, the National Achievers Society (NAS)' outstanding seniors have demonstrated dedication and excellence throughout their high school years. The 2024 graduating class not only achieved a 100% graduation rate but also garnered acceptance to notable universities throughout Florida and across the nation, showcasing their hard work, commitment to academic excellence, and resilience. They accomplished these goals even in the face of the significant challenges posed by COVID-19, which forced most to spend part of their freshman year, 2020-2021, learning online. Still, they consistently rose to the occasion.

Although remarkable, this is, of course, expected. Most were inducted into NAS before high school, selected in large part because of demonstrated high performance, and then nurtured to continue to focus and succeed.

As a result, they are now enrolled at most of Florida's universities as well as Clark Atlanta, Columbia, Georgetown, Grambling, Hampton, Howard, Morehouse, Northwestern, Savannah College of Art and Design, Spelman, Tuskegee, and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill among other schools. Most were offered either full or partial Florida Bright Futures Scholarships, as well as awards from their chosen schools and from outside entities such as the Future of STEM Scholars Initiative (FOSSI), Take Stock in Children, and the United Negro College Fund.

Throughout their years, these students exemplified what it means to be National Achievers. They engaged in rigorous academic programs at their schools, excelling in dual enrollment, honors, and advanced placement courses, and participated in a wide array of extracurricular activities, including NAS and our annual Brain Bowl Competitions and State Pre-College Summit. They also took on leadership roles within their communities, such as volunteering at homeless shelters and partnering with their local police force to help create awareness and foster better relationships within their neighborhoods. This well-rounded high school experience not only enriched their education but also equipped them with essential skills that will benefit them in their future endeavors.

Joshua Washington, the 2024 NAS State President, is a testament to the rewards of pushing to excel on all fronts. His diligence in and outside of the classroom earned him a full 4-year scholarship to Florida A&M University, a prize for participating on the 2024 FEF Brain Bowl 2nd place 11th-12th grade math team representing the UCF McKnight Center of Excellence (COE). This was no small feat. To receive a full ride to Florida A&M, Joshua earned a 5.0 GPA in his high school engineering magnet program and scored at least a 1360 on the SAT, all while leading his high school's marching band and his COE math team. After earning his associate's from FAMU, Joshua will pursue his B.S. in Biomedical Engineering from the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering.



Joshua Washington

Abraham Flynn, the 2024 Dr. Israel Tribble, Jr., Florida National Achiever of the Year, and president of NAS at the Atlantic Coast Center of Excellence, excelled at every turn as well, including as captain of the winning state math Brain Bowl team in 2023 and founder of a non-profit called Techy Seniors, which offered free technology education to empower seniors to navigate today's digital world with confidence.



Abraham Flynn

With a 5.1 GPA and excellent SAT score, Abe enrolled at Northwestern University this fall and is majoring in computer science and economics. "NAS gave me invaluable leadership experience, from serving as president and leading an organization to coaching a 6th-8th grade math team and mentoring them in competition," he says. "Each role NAS provided challenged me to step out of my comfort zone, strengthening my ability to lead and empowering me to become the confident person I am today."

"Each role NAS provided challenged me to step out of my comfort zone, strengthening my ability to lead and empowering me to become the confident person I am today."

-- Abraham Flynn, 2024 Florida National Achiever of the Year

Centers of Excellence: Building Stronger Communities through Service and Unity

The Florida Education Fund's Centers of Excellence (COE's) serve a dual mission: foster academic excellence and nurture a spirit of community engagement and service across the State. Through this commitment, elementary and secondary students not only advance scholastically but also contribute meaningfully to the neighborhoods they call home.

With a focus on addressing the unique needs of their local areas, each COE annually creates avenues for impactful service initiatives. National Achievers at the COE's engage in diverse community-focused projects—from mentorship programs for younger children and environmental conservation to food drives and cultural workshops.

For years, the Palm Beach County COE has sponsored a stand-out example, its Community Police Relations Forum, a monthly event where Achievers, other citizens and law enforcement come together to promote dialogue, mutual respect, and trust. These

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Centers of Excellence: Building Stronger Communities through Service and Unity

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vital discussions build understanding, bridging gaps and strengthening bonds within the County.

Santa Fe College’s COE in Gainesville also makes notable impact through Achievers in Action, a partnership between National Achievers and veterans. Recently, this team

collaborated to donate nonperishable food and water to hurricane victims in surrounding counties. They also support local organizations like the Caring and Sharing Learning Center and Star Centre Theatre by donating essential supplies, clothing, books, and toys.

For participating students, these service efforts instill valuable social and organizational

skills, greater empathy, and a stronger sense of social responsibility. Thus, through FEF’s COE’s, students develop not only academic mastery but also the values of respect, courtesy and kindness—qualities essential for building sensitive, proactive leaders.

In addition to service projects, COE students regularly organize cultural events to celebrate diversity within their communities. Workshops and presentations showcasing various cultural backgrounds foster inclusivity and encourage dialogue and awareness across different perspectives.

By empowering students to serve and celebrate their communities, the FEF’s Centers of Excellence continue to cultivate compassionate leaders who are equipped to make positive impact locally and beyond.



NAS Palm Beach County’s Community Police Relations Forum features monthly discussions between community members and police.

FEF CodeMasters Takes the APP LAB on the Road

This fall, FEF CodeMasters’ APP LAB hit the road, visiting communities whose residents generally are underrepresented in STEM fields to show them they too can create with technology, not just use it. Since late October, the APP LAB has engaged children, teens, and adults at major central Florida events, inspiring them to dive into phone app creation.

On October 26, the APP LAB set up at the West Central Florida Girl Scout Fest at the Florida State Fairgrounds, where more than 1,800 attendees explored various interactive enrichment activities. At the APP LAB, young participants designed and built simple functional apps using MIT App Inventor, developing quick finger-drawing and talking-greeting apps with the guidance of FEF CodeMasters’ instructors. This experience allowed the girls to watch their creations come to life on mobile screens, sparking excitement and curiosity.



McKnight Alumna Dr. Taylor Rodman leads an app building session in St. Petersburg, Florida.

After Girl Scout Fest, the APP LAB powered up on November 9 at the Pinellas Diaspora Arts Project’s Community Tech Day in St. Petersburg. At the Thomas “Jet” Jackson Recreation Center, participants of all ages customized and programmed mobile apps in real-time, discovering the possibilities of making with technology.

possibilities of making with technology.

On November 15, CodeMasters headlined the Pinellas Diaspora Arts Project Community Tech Day in Clearwater, hosting a drone programming and flight room on the Arts 4 Life Academy program campus. Later, during National Computer Science Education Week (December 9-15, 2024), CodeMasters will conduct sessions at Title I schools to teach upper elementary and middle schoolers how to program robots and drones. These events help FEF fulfill its commitment to make tech education accessible in underresourced communities and empower participants to unlock their potential in the digital world.



CodeMasters’ John Britton teaches boys to program drones during Community Tech Day.

Upcoming FEF Events

March 20-22, 2025

39th Annual Brain Bowl Competitions and Florida National Achievers Society Pre-College Summit

August 2025

MDF New Fellows’ Orientation, Tampa

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Layout & Design: Lyra Logan, Monica Montes
 Editing: Lyra Logan, Monica Montes, Phyllis Reddick
 Writing: Victoria Cooper-Miller, Lyra Logan, Lawrence Morehouse,
 Phyllis Reddick

The FEF’s mission is to strengthen the larger community by creating and implementing programs and services that lead to greater educational advancement for historically underrepresented groups.

For information on how you may support FEF programs, please call 813-272-2772.



201 East Kennedy Boulevard
 Suite 1525
 Tampa, Florida 33602

Phone: 813-272-2772
 Fax: 813-272-2784



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