



NEWS

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Compton College STEM Center Paves Way for Emerging Physicist

“As a child, I liked to watch space documentaries and shows about the history of the universe. I remember questioning why things are the way they are; I was always trying to figure out how things work,” said Tre Willingham, a member of Compton College’s 2021 graduating class. “There are not many people of color in the physics field and I want to break that barrier.”

Compton College’s current STEM Club president will graduate with multiple associate of science degrees in June and will continue his studies as a physics major at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona this fall. He is interested in particle physics, optics, and electromagnetic applications which may lead him to pursue a career as a research physicist and inventor. “I’m motivated by things that challenge me,” said Willingham. “The detail involved in physics is what attracted me to this field. For me, it’s all about the details. I observe everything, even the smallest details. It’s important to leave no stone unturned.”

The Gardena resident grew up in Littleton, Colorado. After graduating from high school, he went through a “rough spot,” put his education on hold, and tried to make ends meet by working a lot of odd jobs from 2012-2017. After moving to California, he enrolled at Compton College and began to find his career path through his proficiency in mathematics. “Mathematics helped me realize that I needed to take physics because through scientific modeling you can discover why and how things happen.”

Willingham exudes excitement when he talks about the physics projects he has worked on as a member of the Compton College STEM Club. The college’s STEM Center and club provide support to students who are majoring in mathematics, physics, engineering, biology and physical sciences so they can excel academically and transfer to four-year universities. Students in the STEM Club have the opportunity to get hands-on experience with science and engineering projects throughout the academic year.

Currently, Willingham and a small group of club members are building a 20-foot-long bipropellant liquid oxygen rocket with the guidance of Kent Schwitkis, physics professor and STEM Club advisor. The project has received support from businesses, and funding from a local entrepreneur, who in particular, wanted to help build a legacy for college students of color pursuing STEM careers. During the pandemic, the team worked virtually on the rocket at the beginning of the school year and for the last several months were able to come together in person for better collaboration. They have made significant progress on the rocket, have set milestones for the upcoming fall semester, and have kept project logs for the next team of students to advance the project. The first static test fire of the rocket is

still to be announced, but it is targeted for late 2021. “I plan to still contribute to this rocket project when I can and apply the new knowledge I gain while attending Cal Poly Pomona,” Willingham said.

Willingham is grateful for the number of learning opportunities and hands-on experiences available at Compton College that supplement classroom instruction. He also worked on campus as a peer tutor helping other students with all levels of mathematics and physics. Working on campus helped him to better balance his need to earn money with the demands of his studies.

“My academic accomplishments have not been a singular effort,” said Willingham. “I’ve had a lot of support from key people in my life including my academic counselor, physics professor, and STEM Center program specialist at Compton College. They have all played a role in my success.” His advice to other students who face barriers or delays in obtaining their education is: “Always reach out for help. You would be crazy not to ask questions or take advantage of the resources made available to you. With help, you can get it done!”

Photo available online:

http://www.compton.edu/adminandoperations/communityrelations/images/2021/Tre-Willingham_CC-2021.jpg

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About Compton College

Compton College is the community’s education solution offering a full complement of transfer and degree courses, as well as career and technical education. Students may earn an associate degree or certificate, transfer to a four-year university or train for a career. Compton College is located at 1111 E. Artesia Boulevard, Compton, CA 90221.