

VIPC Supports Virginia Smart Community STEM Camp To Help Students Fly Drones And Explore Emerging Technology Careers

Immersive training led by instructors and mentors from the military, public safety, and industry introduce opportunities to advance innovation.

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High school students from throughout Virginia learned how to program and fly drones at the inaugural Virginia Smart Community STEM Camp. The camp, sponsored by the [Virginia Unmanned Systems Center](#) and the Public Safety Innovation Center (PSIC)

at the Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation ([VIPC](#)), provided hands-on training with drones and robotics for students to explore and consider careers in technology and public safety.



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The camp was hosted by the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, where the facilities, including the UMW Esports Center, were used to provide instruction and activities for the campers. Representatives from the Society of American Military Engineers (SAME), Skydio, Tuskegee Airmen Inc., and Little Arms Studios, as well as state and local public safety agencies, shared their expertise and experience with drones, also known as Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), as instructors and mentors.

“We are training the next generation of experts, fostering fresh leadership, and helping young men and women acquire a diverse range of essential skills they will need in the future,” said David Ihrie, the chief technology officer and vice president of Strategic Initiatives and Smart

Communities at VIPC. “Their capabilities will be vital in supporting our country, driving industry growth and propelling the innovation process.”

During the five-day camp, recent graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy led small groups of campers to teach them about programming and operating drones, which included using desktop flight simulators working in small teams. After the campers completed ground school, officers from public safety agencies, including the Virginia State Police (VSP), the George Mason University Police and the Stafford County Sheriff’s Office, guided them through an indoor training course designed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to assess flight skills and safety.

The camp concluded with a challenge that showcased the campers’ piloting abilities. Skydio and Little Arms Studios provided the drones and flight simulation software used during the training and competition with UMW Esports supporting the gaming events. Little Arms Studios donated a new Skydio 2 drone for an award to the camp’s “Top Gun” determined by overall performance and scoring from all activities.

“By introducing campers to the vast possibilities of drones, we broaden their perspectives and show the numerous career choices that they can pursue,” said Chris Sadler, the director of the PSIC. “Our goal is to inspire and advise them and nurture their



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potential to shape the future of drone technology, particularly in public service, and its positive impact on society.”

Smart Community STEM Camp focused on three key areas: emerging technology, the future of learning, and national security, introducing campers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to adapt and succeed in a rapidly changing world, regardless of their career paths. Emphasis on protection and security illustrated the importance of technology to safeguard communities while promoting education and business opportunity. Corporate executives participated in the camp, engaging with the campers to discuss their professions and evolving career opportunities.

“Smart Community STEM Camp is helping to encourage young Virginians interested in pursuing technology-based careers as their pathway to success,” said George Hinckley, the camp’s director. “By exposing them to emerging technologies within operational context and empowering them with the tools, knowledge, and a collaborative spirit, we are sowing the seeds for future trailblazers and leaders in industry.”

About Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation (VIPC):

VIPC: Connecting innovators with opportunities. As the nonprofit operations arm of the Virginia Innovation Partnership Authority (VIPA), VIPC is the commercialization and seed stage economic development driver in the Commonwealth that leads funding, infrastructure, and policy initiatives to support Virginia’s innovators, entrepreneurs, startups, and market development strategies. VIPC collaborates with local, regional, state, and federal partners to support the expansion and diversification of Virginia’s economy. Programs include: Virginia Venture Partners (VVP) | VVP Fund of Funds (SSBCI) | Virginia Founders Fund (VFF) | Commonwealth Commercialization Fund (CCF) | Petersburg Founders Fund (PFF) | Smart Communities | The Virginia Smart Community Testbed | The Virginia Unmanned Systems Center | Virginia Advanced Air Mobility Alliance (VAAMA) | The Public Safety Innovation Center | Entrepreneurial Ecosystems | Regional Innovation Fund (RIF) | Federal Funding Assistance Program (FFAP) for SBIR & STTR | University Partnerships | Startup Company Mentoring & Engagement. For more information, please visit www.VirginialPC.org. Follow VIPC on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

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