



# OUR FUTURE IS SCIENCE



**ENGAGING YOUTH TO HARNESS SCIENCE  
TO MAKE THEIR COMMUNITIES  
HEALTHIER, STRONGER, AND MORE RESILIENT**

[www.ourfutureisscience.org](http://www.ourfutureisscience.org)

## **PROGRAM PROSPECTUS**

July 2025

# OFIS Mentees & Mentors





## ABOUT OFIS

Many of society's most pressing matters are scientific: infectious diseases, health and well-being, agricultural sustainability, and water security, among others. Youth around the world have been at the forefront of these issues by bringing to light the connection between urgent global matters and the experiences of local communities.

In response to this extraordinary cultural inflection point, the **Aspen Institute Science & Society Program** launched a nonprofit initiative called **Our Future Is Science (OFIS)**. Through exploration of the scientific endeavor, OFIS inspires the next generation of science leaders and ignites a movement to integrate near-peer mentorship with informal STEM education by engaging youth in science to make locally driven impacts on their communities.

**Our mission is to equip rising generations to address societal challenges through innovative, science-based solutions.** OFIS inspires the next generation of STEM leaders and empowers socially conscious youth to become innovators and advocates, advancing science and creating positive change in the 21st century. **OFIS has three primary goals:**

- Spark curiosity and passion for applying scientific principles to improve local communities;
- Accelerate students' engagement in STEM education and careers by connecting them with scientist-mentors; and
- Equip students with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to become leaders in their communities and beyond.

### Founding, past, and current supporters

**AMGEN® Foundation**  
Inspiring the Scientists of Tomorrow



Carson Family  
Charitable Trust

**TOTAL APPLICANTS,  
IMPRESSIONS, ENGAGEMENTS,  
EMAILS, ATTENDEE  
INTERACTIONS, WEBSITE  
VISITS & VIEWS, POST LIKES  
AND REACH SINCE 2021**





## OUR TEAM



**Aaron Mertz** is a biophysicist and educator and has been recognized internationally for his laboratory research and advocacy for underrepresented groups in science. He joined the Aspen Institute in 2019 as founding Director of the Science & Society Program and founded OFIS in 2021.



**Jylana Sheats** is an applied behavior scientist and has leveraged her education, training, and experience to lead, shape, and innovate across public, private and non-profit sectors. Her individual and collaborative efforts have focused on understanding and designing solutions to address factors that impact health behaviors and health outcomes.



**Hassan Farah** is an OFIS alumnus mentor and the Science & Community Postdoc for the Aspen Institute. While completing a B.S. and Ph.D. in Biomedical Sciences, Hassan has developed and directed leadership training and peer mentorship programs. He has also organized large-scale demonstrations and negotiations as a student activist.



**Ebony Tyler** has 20 years of experience in public education and is the founder and Executive Director of Liberated Success Inc., a youth career development nonprofit. Ebony is passionate about youth career development and parenting, which led her to create two podcasts, Career Exploration Saturday and The New Normal in Parenting.



**Sejal Goud** is a senior at Princeton University, where she is pursuing studies in public policy and international affairs. She is committed to leveraging her backgrounds in advocacy and journalism to promote the link between civic engagement and science communication, as well as to support underrepresented youth in the sciences.



**Caroline Gelb** is a science producer, program manager, and educator who loves to share her excitement about the promises science can bring to future generations.



**Dorianis Peréz** completed her Ph.D. in Computational Science from Florida State University. She is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences at Northern New Mexico College. She has been involved with OFIS as a Mentor, Ambassador, Lead Ambassador, and now OFIS staff member.



**Breana Turner** is a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in the Translational Biology, Medicine, and Health program at Virginia Tech, where she also earned a Master of Public Health degree. She has been involved with OFIS as a Mentor and is now an OFIS staff member.

## ADVISORY GROUP

To ensure that the program stays true to its mission, the [OFIS Advisory Group](#) offers expertise, experience, and counsel.



**Jayshree Seth, Ph.D.**  
Chief Science Advocate  
and Corporate Scientist  
at 3M



**Mandë Holford, Ph.D.**  
Associate Professor in  
Chemistry at CUNY  
Hunter College and The  
CUNY Graduate Center



**Gabriel Reyes, M.S.**  
Founder and CEO of  
FLi Sci and Ph.D.  
student at Stanford  
University



**Omar Gawayed, Ph.D.**  
NYU Chemical  
Engineering Graduate  
and NYC March for  
Science Leader



**Jay Flores**  
Global STEM  
ambassador and  
founder of  
Invent the Change

## Advisory Group Alumni



**Dao-Yi Chow**  
Co-founder of the fashion  
brand Public School  
**2021-2023**



**Dietram Scheufele, Ph.D.**  
Vilas Distinguished Achievement  
Professor of Life Sciences  
Communication, University of  
Wisconsin-Madison  
**2021-2023**



**Augusta Uwamanzu-Nna**  
Harvard graduate, UCSF medical  
student, high school Science  
Talent Search Finalist  
**2021-2022**



**Adnaan Wasey**  
Emmy Award-winning  
producer and writer.  
**2021-2023**



## OUR STORY

Our Future Is Science (OFIS) was conceptualized in response to tremendous societal forces: 1) youth activism around the world on behalf of issues rooted in science, such as climate change and water management, and 2) calls for equity across fields, especially in science and public health, based on vast disparities in outcomes from the COVID pandemic.



The co-founders of OFIS authored an essay in *LeapsMag* (now [Upworthy Science](#)) and the Aspen Institute blog, “[Democratize the White Coat by Honoring Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in Science](#),” introducing the ethos and societal dynamics inspiring this endeavor.

In 2021, an outstanding team of education, science, and media specialists launched this national initiative.



The initiative was named a [2023 Falling Walls Engage Finalist](#) and [2024 Winner](#) among 200+ and 100+ applications, respectively, from 50+ countries,, steps toward becoming Falling Walls Science Breakthrough of the Year in Science Engagement. In November 2024, we presented the initiative before a global audience in Berlin, Germany, at the Falling Walls Science Summit.



# ACCOMPLISHMENTS & FUTURE GOALS

**OFIS conceptualized** by the nonprofit Aspen Institute Science & Society Program in collaboration with the citizen-centered-design firm Coda Societies

**Received seed funding** from Genentech and Manitou Fund

**Published essay** "[Democratize the White Coat](#)" introducing ethos and societal dynamics that inspired OFIS

**Expanded size** of mentorship program

**National educational media campaign** ignites science-based solutions to societal issues

**Partnering with cross-sector organizations** to expand reach and activate youth engagement

**Community Talk Series** creates public, virtual platform for scientists and activists to share experiences with youth

**Science Engagement Projects** enacted by first cohort of Mentees

**Received additional support** from Columbia University's NSF Science and Technology Center for climate, LEAP

## 2019–2020

## 2021

## 2022

## 2023 & Beyond

**Hired full-time team** members and expert consultants

**Designed unique curriculum** about science and community

**Disseminated call for applications** for mentorship program

**Onboarded first cohort** of 50 students selected from 260+ applicants

**Received additional funding** from Rita Allen Foundation, 3M, and Lyda Hill Philanthropies

**Amplified 2022 successes** including curriculum design, programming, and fundraising

**Expanded size** of mentorship program

**Launched Ambassador Program** for OFIS alumni

**Enacting recurring media campaigns** on the pulse of current events

**Creating alumni activities** for past participants to advise new students

**Ultimately working to establish a long-lasting educational program** that sets the standard for youth mentorship in science and community

**Falling Walls Science Engagement Winner** in 2024 ([global Science Summit presentation](#), [application entry video](#), [press release](#))



# Falling Walls International Science Summit



**2024 Winner for Science Engagement Breakthrough of the Year** at the Falling Walls Science Summit in Berlin, Germany, with focus on climate adaptation.

Previously, in 2023, we were named a **Finalist** in the same competition.





## How we have worked with Partners



**3M**

- 3M Corporate Scientist and Chief Science Advocate is a star member of our Advisory Group
- 3M senior administrator was a participant in the Science & Society Program's roundtable and forthcoming report on public trust in science
- We hosted a tour for our participants of the 3M Innovation Center to discover how breakthroughs in materials are benefiting communities
- Designated 3 participants in 2024–2025 cohort as 3M Scholars from Minnesota and created curated programming for them



### **Learning the Earth with Artificial Intelligence and Physics – Columbia University's NSF Science and Technology Center**

- Hosted 2 Community Talks with Columbia experts about climate data science
- Co-designed a climate and data science module in the OFIS curriculum
- OFIS Directors delivered keynote address about student engagement at LEAP Annual Meeting
- OFIS Director participated in bidirectional feedback session at LEAP workshop with community partners
- OFIS Ambassadors participated in a bidirectional feedback session with LEAP researchers



## How we have worked with Partners



### **Burroughs Wellcome Fund**

- Hosted 1 Community Talk about genomics and epigenetics with Burroughs Wellcome Fund Associate Communications and Special Projects Officer, who previously led research activities in the Human Genome Project
- Designated 3 participants in 2023–2024 cohort as Burroughs Wellcome Scholars from North Carolina created curated programming for them—and another 3 students will receive this designation for the 2025-2026 cohort.

Carson Family  
Charitable Trust

### **Carson Family Charitable Trust**

- Designated 5 participants annually for 4 years starting 2023–2024 as Carson Scholars from New York City and another 5 students will receive this designation for the 2025-2026 cohort.



### **Wellpoint Tennessee**

- Will designate 4 participants in 2025–2026 cohort as Wellpoint Scholars from Tennessee and will create curated programming for them



### **Amgen Foundation**

- Created a [channel on Amgen's LabXchange platform](#) with our mentor lab tour recordings and other media

# FOUR PRINCIPAL PILLARS OF OFIS



<b>Mentorship Program</b>	<p>This annual, national, virtual <a href="#">Program</a> connects high-schoolers with STEM graduate students to explore science-and-community intersections through our continually evolving curriculum composed of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• OFIS elibrary;</li><li>• Module-based learning on topics such as AI, climate science, genomics and epigenetics, and big data; and</li><li>• Professional development workshops (e.g., science communication, storytelling, LinkedIn profile development).</li></ul> <p>Weekly Mentorship Team meetings help facilitate this academic year-long journey of near-peer mentorship, scientific learning, community engagement, and career exploration. Mentees and mentors receive honoraria for their active participation in OFIS to honor that their time and commitment to the program.</p>
<b>Educational Campaigns for the Public</b>	<p>OFIS's <a href="#">Educational Campaigns</a> on social media ask youth to share their visions, in the form of short videos submitted via social media, for how science could be used to solve an issue in their community. Submissions are adjudicated based on innovation, creativity, and feasibility with awards given to the top entrants.</p>
<b>Ambassador Program</b>	<p>The OFIS <a href="#">Ambassador Program</a> consists of outstanding alumni mentors and mentees who work together on a range of topics in which they connect science with local communities and develop new Science Engagement Projects. OFIS ambassadors also give back to our network of mentors and mentees by attending feedback sessions for Science Engagement Projects, hosting workshops, and collaborating with external partners as representatives of OFIS.</p>
<b>Champions Program</b>	<p>The <a href="#">Champions Program</a> is designed for qualified applicants to the Mentorship Program but whom we could not admit due to administrative capacity (e.g., staffing and financial constraints). These Champions receive special invitations to OFIS activities such as our Community Talks and a selection of workshops for professional development including public speaking and scientific storytelling. Champions are also encouraged to participate in our educational campaigns on social media.</p>

# MENTORSHIP PROGRAM OVERVIEW



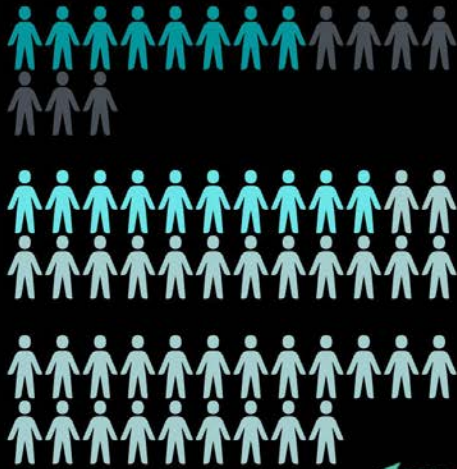
<b>Mentees and Mentors</b>	<p>To date, 700+ youth and young adults from across the U.S. have applied to Our Future is Science. We have accepted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>2021–2022 Cohort 1</b> - 50 students</li><li>• <b>2022–2023 Cohort 2</b> - 60 students</li><li>• <b>2023–2024 Cohort 3</b> - 90 students</li><li>• <b>2024–2025 Cohort 4</b> - 75 students</li></ul>
<b>Mentorship Teams</b>	<p>Mentorship teams (3 mentors and 2–3 mentees) meet weekly from October to June annually.</p>
<b>Community Talk Series</b>	<p>To complement our curriculum, we have hosted monthly community talks and workshops with leading professionals whose work is at the intersection of STEM and community. Speakers hailed from 3M, Columbia University, Procter &amp; Gamble, LinkedIn, the University of Maryland School of Dentistry, University of California - San Francisco, Gilead, and other entities.</p>
<b>Science Engagement Projects</b>	<p>Students work to identify a problem in their community and apply the scientific process, coupled with learnings from the OFIS eLibrary and insights from the OFIS Community Talk speakers, to design a Science Engagement Project, with topics including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Impacts of Poor-quality Housing in the NYC (South Bronx) on Low-Income Families</li><li>• Cancer Clusters Coldwater Creek (North St. Louis)</li><li>• "Redlining" in Tacoma, Washington</li><li>• African Americans and the Criminal Justice System in Nashville, Tennessee</li><li>• Black Maternal and Child Health Pregnancy in Oakland, California</li><li>• Microplastics in Jacksonville, Florida</li></ul>



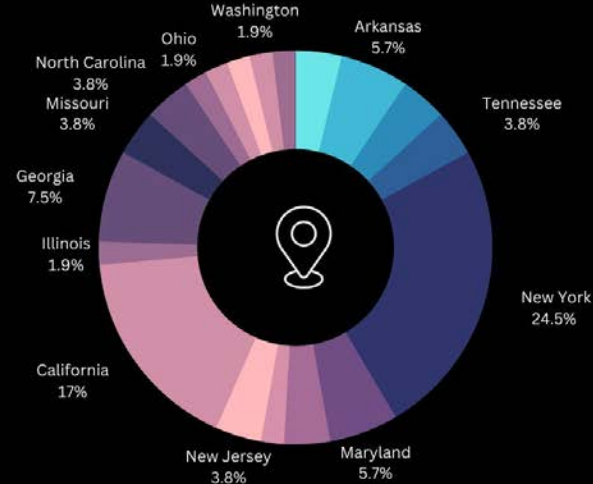
MENTEE DEMOGRAPHICS

2021-2023 Mentees

Year in high school



Where they're located



# MENTOR UNIVERSITIES



OUR FUTURE IS  
SCIENCE

aspen institute



ATSU | A.T. Still University  
FIRST IN WHOLE PERSON HEALTHCARE

CAPELLA UNIVERSITY

Carnegie Mellon University

GRADUATE CENTER

CSH Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



Delaware State University  
Making our mark on the world



Duke UNIVERSITY



FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

FIU



MEHARRY MEDICAL COLLEGE

NYU



OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Oregon State University

NJIT New Jersey Institute of Technology

SDSU



UND UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA



R

Stony Brook University



THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA



UCLA

UF UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA



University of CINCINNATI



USC

NM

WILLIAM & MARY



VT



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY



## MENTOR GRADUATE SUBJECTS OF STUDY

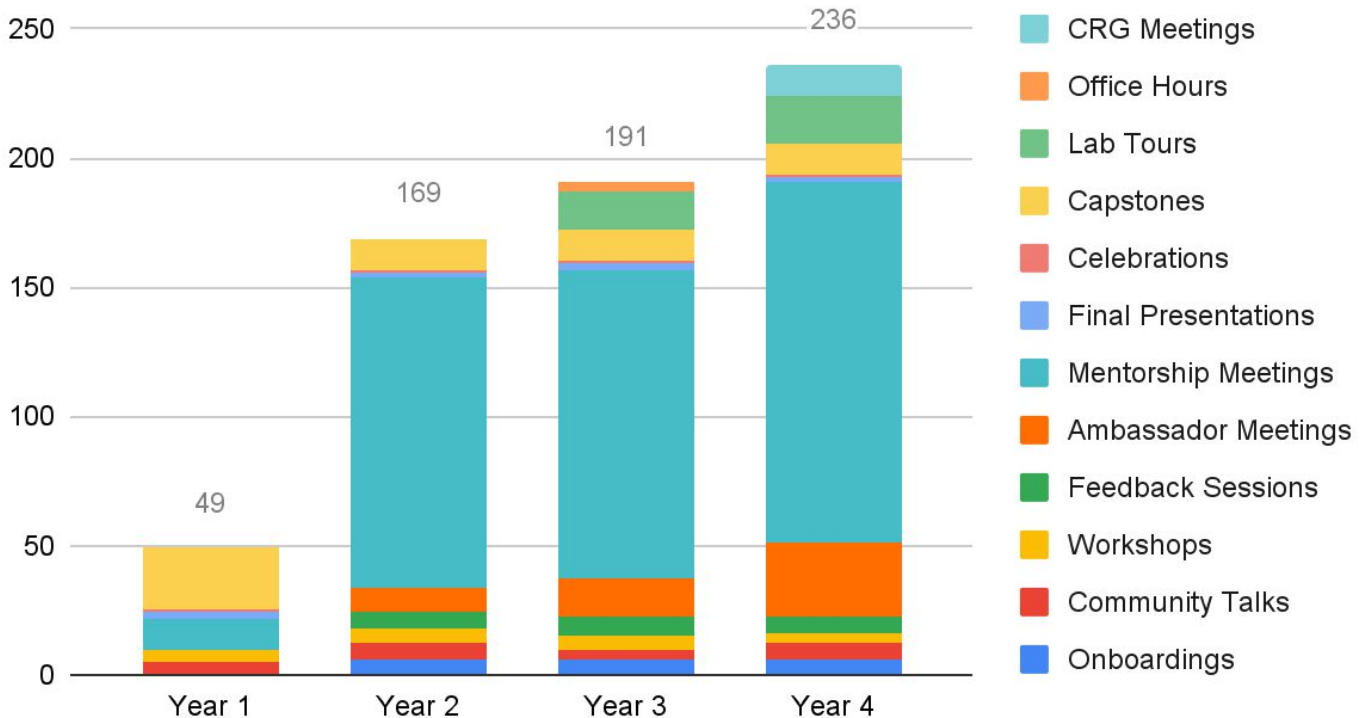
- Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
- Biomedical Engineering
- Industrial Hygiene and Environmental Sciences
- Psychology
- Indigenous Health
- Nursing
- Immunology
- Geography
- Engineering and Public Policy
- Biomedical Science
- Environmental Engineering
- Pharmacology & Toxicology
- Public Administration- Health Disparities
- Neuroscience
- Medicine
- Sociology & Human Services
- Epidemiology
- Translational Biosciences
- Biology/Molecular biology
- Applied Mathematics
- Public Health and Implementation Science
- Civil Engineering
- Clinical Psychology
- Molecular & Cellular Biology
- Geology
- Vascular Biology
- Cancer Biology
- Mechanical Engineering
- Environmental Science Hydrology





645 educational events and meetings  
hosted over 4 years

## Events by Type







## **Bringing the Scientific Process to Life**

Mentor Lab Tour Highlights

<https://youtu.be/046niCIFSAc>





## MENTORSHIP CURRICULUM

The OFIS team of educational and scientific experts designed a [nimble, bespoke, evidence-based curriculum](#) to help shape tangible trajectories toward careers that will make communities and society better through science.

[Participatory design and feedback processes](#) in each module enable mentees and mentors to participate in their own learning, promote co-learning and co-teaching, and ensure that student needs are met with the ability to adapt in real time. Accompanying program components that bring the curriculum to life include:

- Weekly deep dives with [reflections on relevance](#) to students' lived experiences;
- Curated [eLibrary](#) to support exploration of science–community issues; and
- Monthly [Community Talk Series](#) featuring outside experts in STEM fields.

### Curriculum Topics (2021–2024)

- ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTATION
- BIG DATA & INNOVATION
- HEALTH & HEALTHCARE
- ENGINEERING & ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
- ASTROPHYSICS & SPACE EXPLORATION
- GENOMICS & EPIGENETICS



## STUDENT SCIENCE ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

A [culminating, mentee-led, community-based Science Engagement Project](#) enables students to demonstrate learning and highlight their unique place as future scientifically minded leaders.

Mentees will explore a community issue of interest or relevant to their personal experiences. Through an in-depth review of the literature and informational interviews (with scientists, activists, and other stakeholders), and discussion with their Mentorship Team, mentees will:

- Define the problem to be solved;
- Connect it to a global U.N. Sustainable Development Goal and/or Healthy People 2030;
- Design a science-based solution— applying learnings from the OFIS curriculum;
- Create a communication/dissemination plan tailored to what is accessible and preferred by their audience/community; and
- Present or implement their solution (prototype or actual).

**OUTCOMES:** Through this process, mentees will have increased awareness of issues impacting their community while simultaneously developing science-based solutions. Invaluable skills they will gain include:

- Evidence review and information synthesis;
- Problem identification;
- Research question development and other elements of the scientific process;
- Collaboration skills;
- Presentation skills; and
- Science communication competencies to support engaging with multi-sector audiences.



## EXAMPLE COMMUNITY & PUBLIC EVENTS

OFIS also features monthly [Community Talks](#) and [Professional Development Workshops](#) with those in science or science-adjacent careers to share their career trajectories and how their work intersects with local communities.

**Eleanor Fleming, DDS, PhD, MPH**

Assistant Dean, DEI  
University of Maryland School of Dentistry

**Joshua Omonuk**

Ugandan Climate Activist  
RiseUp Movement

**Daisa Taylor**

Inventor  
Founder, CEO  
VariegateHealth

**Shanell McGoy, Ph.D., MPH**

Director, Corporate & Social Responsibility  
Gilead Sciences

**Maria Flores, MA**

Founder  
Brenner Insights

**Brittney N. Doyle**

Founder  
WISE Health SF

**Michelle Woodard**

Senior Manager  
3M Office & Innovation Center

**Adrian Land, Ph.D.**

Senior Regulatory Affairs Manager  
Procter & Gamble

**Kramer Wimberly, MSDT**

Master Scuba Diver  
Diving with a Purpose

**Danielle Ignace, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor  
University of British Columbia

**Courtney Cogburn, Ph.D.**

Professor, Columbia University  
Co-director, Justice Equity & Tech Lab

**Pierre Gentine, Ph.D.**

Professor, Columbia University  
Director, LEAP Center

**Kristopher Green**

Relationship Manager  
LinkedIn

**Malik & Miles**

MIT Doctoral Students  
TikTok Twins

**Daphne O. Martschenko, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor  
Stanford University  
Center for Biomedical Ethics

**Mandeep (Muno) Sekhon**

Associate Communications and Special Projects Officer  
Burroughs Wellcome Fund

**Marcus D. Walter**

News Anchor & Meteorologist  
WTVO/WQRF  
Science Communicator & Storyteller

**Ashley M. Taylor, Ph.D.**

Senior Scientist, Products Research  
Procter & Gamble

**Mutale Nkonde**

Founder & CEO  
AI for the People

**Chris Hemphill**

Senior Director, Commercial Intelligence  
Woebot Health

## MENTEE/MENTOR IMPACTS

**53%**

Reported that they **did not know how to explain science–community linkages** *before* participating in the program

**97%**

Reported that *after* participating in the program, they **knew how to explain science–community linkages**

## MENTEE/MENTOR IMPACTS

92%

Mentees rated the mentorship program  
as “**good**” or “**very good**”

91%

Mentees described their experience as  
“**good**” or “**very good**”





## MENTEE & MENTOR TESTIMONIALS

**"OFIS definitely made me want to be more involved in the intersection between science and community in the future, and I hope that I can continue this throughout my professional development."**

*— OFIS Mentee, 11th Grade*

**"Through OFIS, I have developed a newfound interest in data science. This was something I could not do without my Science Engagement Project."**

*— OFIS Mentee, 10th Grade*

**"Our Future Is Science is the love language between community and science. It captures the nuances in STEM."**

*— OFIS Mentee, 12th grade*

**"OFIS supported me, and in my opinion, helped me get into college, as well as the combined BA/MD program. I seriously do not think I would be where I am if it weren't for my experience with OFIS."**

*— OFIS Ambassador*

**"If I didn't have programs like this to make me dive deeper, then I wouldn't know about opportunities."**

*— OFIS Mentee, 11th grade*

**"I was not sure about attending college due to financial difficulties, but after listening to my mentor's story, I decided to continue on with this path. My mentors encouraged me to join programs so I could build up my experience and display it to colleges and future jobs."**

*— OFIS Mentee, 12th grade*

**"I was able to land an internship for this summer, and I credit my experiences with OFIS for helping me. During the interview, I was able to talk about OFIS, which helped me stand out from other candidates."**

*— OFIS Mentor, Graduate Student*



OUR FUTURE IS  
**SCIENCE**

# NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN

[www.ourfutureisscience.org/campaign](http://www.ourfutureisscience.org/campaign)



Campaign Welcome by

**Dr. Marcia McNutt**

President, National Academies of Sciences

<https://youtu.be/R3SDEo-EaFw>



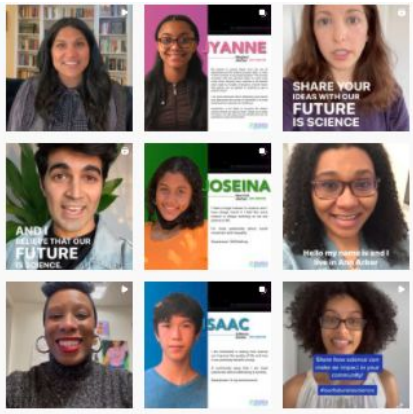
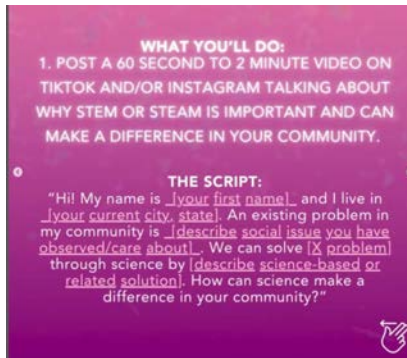
# NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN



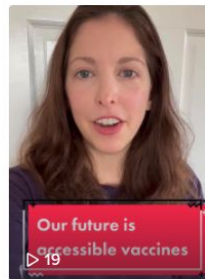
@ourfutureisscience

Social media can serve as a platform for activism and a powerful channel of positive messaging and learning about science as a concrete path toward change. Partnering schools, youth-serving organizations, scientists, and influencers are using Instagram and TikTok to create opportunities for young people across the U.S. to share their visions for ***“how science could be used to solve problems in their communities.”***

Disseminating insights from the campaign will ensure that the voices of young people across the U.S. are heard widely.



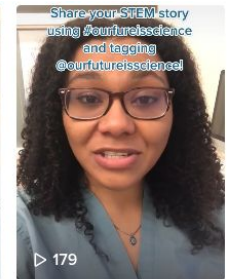
Dr. Nina Vasani shares the...



Kira shares how science c...



Saad Amer shares the im...



Otana shares how #ophth...



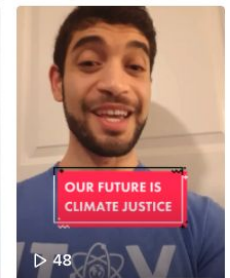
How do you think #scienc...



What does a scientist me...



Our future is #sustainable...



Omar shares ho

Get app

## NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN: WINNER HIGHLIGHTS



Water Contamination Innovation by Samara  
(North Carolina)



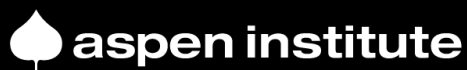
Micro-plastic Innovations by Olha  
(New Jersey)



Climate Innovation by Simone  
(Arizona)



# OUR FUTURE IS SCIENCE



## CONTACT US



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