Soaring Together

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Big News coming in February!

We have officially formed a Foundation...stay tuned for more information about our board leadership team and the exciting things we will be doing for WMAA!

Meet WMAA’S Renaissance Man!

You might have heard that term applied to Leonardo da Vinci. Now we are pleased to introduce you to our own renaissance man, senior Jaden Gani.

A renaissance man is a person whose expertise spans a significant number of various subject areas. Check! Sit and talk with Jaden for a few minutes, and you’ll be amazed by his wide-ranging interests. He likes to cook, especially Korean food. He’s handy with a pair of knitting needles. He’s a bit of an artist. He’s into languages.

And, perhaps most importantly for his career at WMAA, Jaden loves engineering. “I knew WMAA had a reputation for engineering, but I also had some friends who were attending,” he admits. “I came for a few different reasons, but once I got into the engineering classes my freshman year, I was hooked.”

Jaden loves to merge data and electronics to solve a practical need. For example, he’s currently pondering how to use meteorological data so that he can electronically water the herbs in his garden. He’s also the lead programmer on his robotics team, and a self-professed electronics hobbyist. “I tried to build an analog synthesizer, but I didn’t know enough,” he admits. “But the failure was good, because it drove me forward to learn more! Now I’m reading a book to get more of the theoretical knowledge.”

Jaden can’t get enough engineering. “I love all the choices here,” he says enthusiastically. “We have so many engineering classes, and you can branch out into all kinds of different directions. I’ve explored Intro to Robotics, Digital Engineering, AP Computer Science, and now Autonomous Vehicles. I also love the fabrication lab, because I have unlimited access to all the tools and materials there.”

For Jaden, WMAA was “love at first byte.” “This is an unconventional place,” he notes. “The teachers really encourage students to explore and try things. I never had thoughts of going anywhere else!”

Jaden Gani never thought of going anywhere else!
“Teachers thrive when you give them space and time to hone their craft,” says Chris Williams, Director of Teaching and Learning. “And expert teachers help mold excellent students.”

Real World Expertise? Priceless.

Part of our purpose here at WMAA is to help students explore real world, high-demand career opportunities through class work as well as extracurricular projects. GE Aviation is a significant and deeply committed partner in this effort.

WMAA has impressive bench strength in engineering and robotics. “Ron Baum, a retired teacher, jump-started our robotics program,” recalls engineering teacher Peter VandenBerg. “He designed a one-year course for sophomores that would give a comprehensive overview of engineering, technology and robotics. He focused specifically on hands-on activities and career exposure. His goal was to show students a broad perspective, and help them understand an education path to jobs that interested them.”

What’s in it for GE Aviation? In a word: community. “We see education support as a great way to give back to the community,” says Larry Wilcox, Advanced Lead Engineer–Electronic Hardware, who coordinates the Friday visits. “Our people enjoy working with the students. This partnership is a valuable and significant way to share our resources and get students excited about engineering.”

One of GE Aviation’s most significant and ongoing gifts to WMAA students is their job shadow program. On most Fridays during the school year, one or two students head over to GE Aviation to job shadow for half a day. “Our students get so excited about this,” says Peter. “They see new things, and identify what they would like to learn more about. Sometimes they can narrow down their interest by ruling out some areas, which is also incredibly helpful.” GE Aviation generously offered more than 30 students the opportunity to engage in this program last year.

WMAA students benefit from GE Aviation’s consistent, in-depth support all year long. “I would estimate that GE Aviation invests 8-10 hours per week in our students,” Peter says. “That’s a huge commitment that we sincerely appreciate and value.”

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We sincerely thank GE Aviation for their investment in and commitment to WMAA!
Becoming Master Educators

Who is typically trying to excel in school? Your first answer is probably, “students.” But at WMMA, our teachers strive for excellence as much as our students do. Now we’re investing time and resources to support that goal.

“Teachers thrive when you give them space and time to hone their craft,” says Chris Williams, Director of Teaching and Learning. “And expert teachers help mold excellent students.”

Expert education doesn’t happen by accident. It requires deliberate effort to carve out time and create opportunities for innovation. “Studies have shown that the most important factor influencing student success is collective teacher efficacy,” says Chris. “It rates even higher than teacher-student relationships, home environment, or parental involvement. ‘Collective teacher efficacy’ is the staff’s belief that together they can inspire growth and change in their students. Our teachers and administration are working together to achieve this common goal.”

What does this look like? Teacher development includes things like mentors for new teachers, as well as one-on-one coaching and observation. It also includes several weeks of professional development time. That’s more than the typical high school teacher would receive. WMMA has also added two innovative efforts: Curriculum Camp and Teacher Leadership Academy.

Curriculum Camp brings teachers together one department at a time. They spend five days thinking about their vision for what they teach and how they are going to convey it. “We have a poster that teachers can put in the classroom fly by,” says Chris. “It’s a sort of a ‘we’re open’ sign that invites other teachers to stroll in and observe,” says Carson. Teachers are using their free hour to visit other classrooms and learn. “Our staff appreciates the opportunity to observe peers in action. However, this practice is also having a big impact on students,” confirms Chris. “Students see teachers trying to learn, and that really changes the dynamic between them.”

This kind of sharing helps teachers learn new techniques. It also surfaces opportunities for cross-disciplinary projects. “Not many schools invest in a full-time person for teacher development, and not all teachers embrace the idea of collaborative learning,” says Chris. “But WMMA’s culture is different. Here, the commitment to excellence runs through students, teachers and staff alike. Our teachers are driving this work forward.”

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Ron invited GE Aviation to partner with WMMA. George Kiefer, then the General Manager of Avionics for North America, responded enthusiastically to his approach. Now in its seventh year, the partnership has grown tremendously. “GE Aviation is a true partner,” says Peter. “In addition to their generous financial support, they bring real world experience to our students. They mentor our robotics teams. They share knowledge through speakers and field trips. We talk with them about curriculum options, and what students need to know when they graduate from high school. That expertise is priceless.”

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Come See What Your Support Can Do!

Want to learn more about how your support can help our students? Join us for a Soaring Together tour. Please contact Kelsea Wierenga at least one week in advance to reserve your spot. All tours begin at 8:30am and last for one hour.

Upcoming Tour Dates

October 23
January 29
February 5 & 26
March 7
April 9 & 30

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Chris Williams, Director of Teaching and Learning

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