

Gates hoping to inspire love of STEM through genealogy

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In this Oct. 2, 2013 file photo, Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. speaks at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. Gates Jr. loves exploring people's family roots, and hoping that type of digging by middle-school and college students will also ignite interest in science and math. Gates and his colleagues just got a funding grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to create a genealogy and genetics summer camp for middle school children and another grant from the National Science Foundation for college-level courses. The summer camps will start at Penn State University and the University of South Carolina this summer and at the American Museum of Natural History in 2017. (AP Photo/Steven Senne, File)

Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. hopes to trigger a love for science, technology and math among American students by turning them on to searching for their family roots.

Gates, the Harvard University scholar and host of a genealogy show on PBS, and fellow researchers from Spelman College and Pennsylvania State University recently received a \$355,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to create a genealogy and genetics summer camp for middle school children, as well as a \$304,000 grant from the National Science Foundation for college-level courses.

The summer camps will start at Penn State University and the University of South Carolina this summer, and at the American Museum of Natural History in 2017. The college courses, in biology with a genetics and genealogy-centered approach, will be held at Spelman College and Morehouse College in Atlanta, and North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina.

"Ancestry chasing through genealogy and genetics is about one thing ultimately and that is you," Gates said in a phone interview. "And what's your favorite subject? Your favorite subject is yourself."

Gates, host of "Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr." on PBS, said the curriculum he is developing would teach social science, history, interview skills, archival skills and biology. The goal is to help students discover an innate love of science, technology, engineering and math that may lead to careers in STEM fields.

Hispanics, blacks, and Native Americans together comprise only 10 percent of workers in science and engineering jobs and 13 percent of [science](#) and engineering degree holders, according to the National

Science Board's Science and Engineering Indicators 2014 report, though they represent 26 percent of the population.

The popularity of genealogy and finding ancestors would get children hooked, potentially inspiring future professors, scientists and mathematicians, said Gates. He said he wasn't worried about being able to keep the attention of young people.

"We're going to teach them about Y-DNA if you're a man, how you get that from your father who got that marker from his father and his father," said Gates, referring to the Y chromosome. Students also will learn about mitochondrial DNA, "which you get from your mother and her mother and her mother, whether you're a man or a woman."

Gates will work with Penn State University professor Nina Jablonski on the summer camps. Jablonski said the grants will make the camps affordable for parents, and help to right an imbalance in STEM fields.

"This new approach seeks to improve the retention of minority students in the sciences by inviting students into biology education with the discovery of unique facts about themselves," Jablonski said.

We would be "taking this whole idea of asking the question of 'Who am I?' into the classroom and getting [students](#) of varying ages to investigate themselves, leading to—we would hope—a whole cascade of positive things," she added.

"Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr." starts its third season on PBS on January 5.

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