
Perseverance pays off for Ph.D. student

Lauren Griggs, the recipient of VCU's Susan E. Kennedy Award, is working to increase the number of women and minorities pursuing STEM careers.



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According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women make up 48 percent of the total workforce but only 24 percent of the workforce in the STEM disciplines – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. A VCU engineering graduate student is trying to change that.

Lauren Griggs, a Ph.D. student in biomedical engineering, was recently awarded VCU's Susan E. Kennedy Award, which recognizes graduate students who are advancing the presence of women in education.



Photo courtesy of Lauren Griggs

‘Just because there’s not too many people who look like me in my field doesn’t mean I’m not going to be successful in my field,’ Griggs says.

The award recognizes the hard work Griggs has been putting into her education through her graduate career at VCU.

“This is my fifth year, and all these things are coming in now,” she said. “I tried for all of these things my first through my fifth year. So if I had given up and said, ‘Oh, I didn’t get it,’ then I never would have been able to be where I am right now.”

Perseverance was needed when she was the only woman of color in her undergraduate classes at the University of Virginia.

“In that respect, it is slightly discouraging sometimes just because you are like, ‘Is this really for me? I don’t see anyone around that looks like me, so maybe I shouldn’t be doing this,’” Griggs said.

“But you have to have that internal drive to be like, ‘Just because there’s not too many people who look like me in my field doesn’t mean I’m not going to be successful in my field.’”

She uses this experience to help incoming freshmen in STEM transition to college through the Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation funded through the National Science Foundation.

Incoming freshmen in this program take a five-week online course to prepare them for college life. They then come to VCU for a week where Griggs teaches their study skills course.

Griggs said being a mentor and a mentee is empowering.

“Try to find a mentor – someone to help support you because if you are feeling lost, connecting with someone else really helps you,” she said.

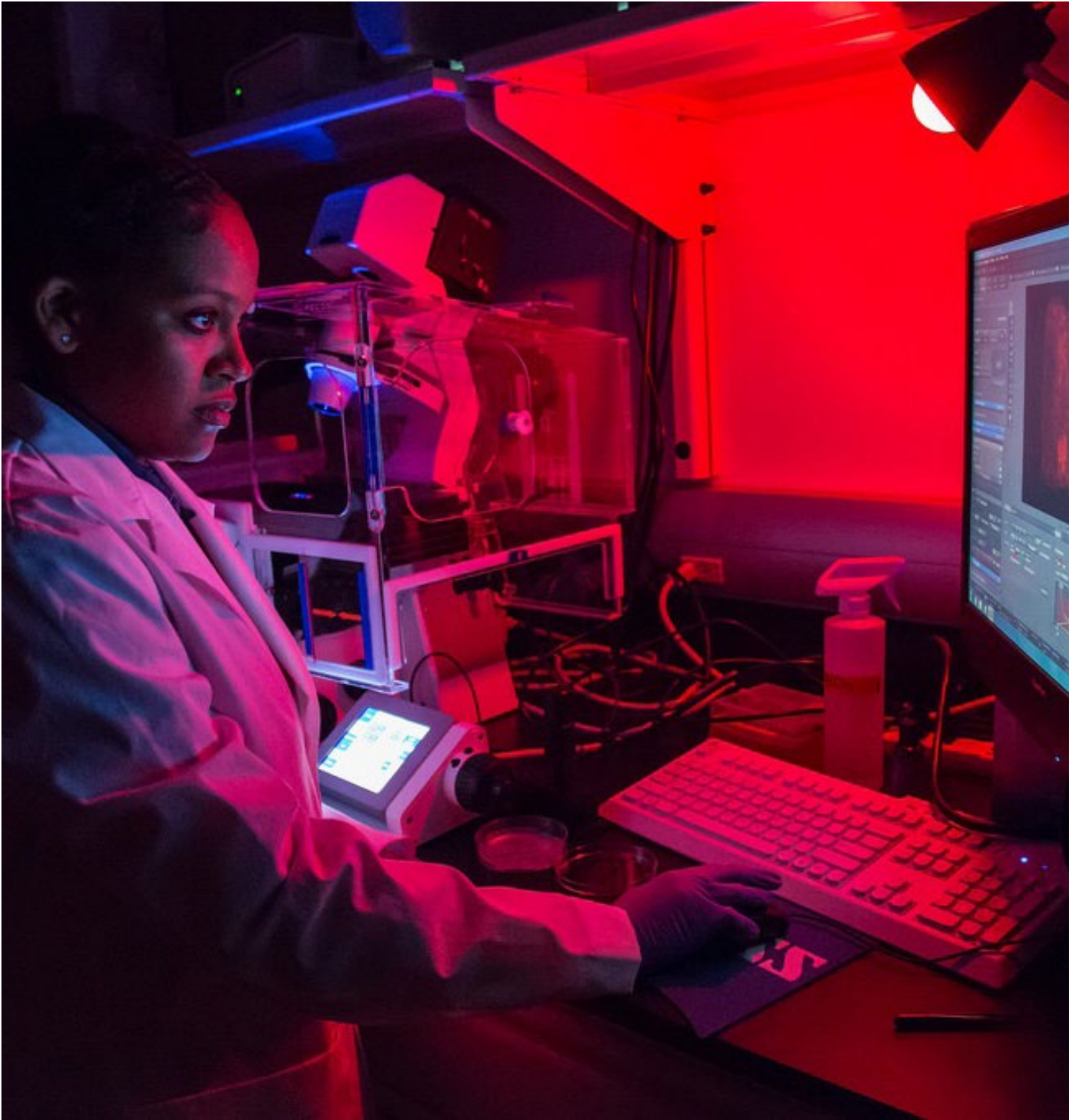


Photo courtesy of Lauren Griggs



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If students feel dissuaded from entering the STEM fields, Griggs wants them to know that people are there to support them along the way.

"I think the biggest thing you can do is persevere. There are going to be times where you feel like you can't make it – specifically minority students," Griggs said. "Just know that you are not alone. Even if you do feel like you are alone, there are a lot of people going through the same thing."

Her perseverance has certainly paid off. Griggs was recently awarded an F31 grant from the National Institutes of Health. The F31 grant is given to predoctoral students from underrepresented groups in the STEM fields. •