High school program produces tomorrow's computer scientists

BY BILL ABBATE, SAS INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS, CARY

Mom and dad gave good advice.

AOIT graduate John Garrison interned at SAS during the program and throughout college. He's now a full-time employee in SAS Solutions OnDemand.

Before Senior Associate Software Developer John Garrison finished middle school, his parents suggested that he apply for the Academy of Information Technology (AOIT) at Apex (NC) High School.

"The program is what introduced me to computer science," Garrison said. "I took four years of programming courses, and that's what got me interested in computer science. It got me to realize what I wanted to major in in college."

The AOIT program is one of 667 National Academy Foundation (NAF) academies, each of which is focused on a specific STEM-related industry. The students in NAF academies take industry-specific classes in addition to their core curriculum, and, through partnerships with local businesses, they complete internships to build on their classroom training.

Apex High's AOIT program – which in 2013 was ranked the No. 1 NAF academy in the country – accepts up to 90 new freshmen per year, and they move together throughout their high school career.

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> *—John Garrison*

According to the AOIT website, "Students follow a computer applications/web design or programming sequence of IT courses, plus the first course in the other sequence (five courses over four years). These courses are all Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses and taught by CTE teachers."

Plus, AOIT students must complete a summer internship between their junior and senior years.

Garrison interned in IT at SAS, not only gaining valuable experience, but making contributions to the business as well.

"I worked for [Senior Hardware Support Manager] Jonathan Smith's team," he said. "I started out helping out with hardware testing and [along with another student] helped create some of the hardware testing scripts that we used. Over time, I just tried to find areas where [Smith] needed programming work, so I did a lot of SAS programming, a lot of SAS reports."

And are you familiar with the IT Portal for Employees? Garrison wrote code for that as an intern, too.

Garrison went on to matriculate at North Carolina State University, while continuing to intern at SAS until he graduated in 2013, at which time he accepted a full-time position in IT. He moved to his current role in SAS Solutions OnDemand last fall.

AOIT Advisory Board

The AOIT Advisory Board comprises representatives from several local tech companies, including SAS, IBM, NetApp, Lenovo and Cisco, among others.

IT Operations and Infrastructure Director Tim Campbell has served on the board since 2009. As a board member, his involvement goes beyond just attending monthly meetings and facilitating internships.

"We get involved in doing mock interviews for students, reviewing their class projects and providing feedback to the students on how they can write a more effective resume for an internship," he said. "And we meet with the teachers and try to help them with any curriculum-oriented questions they have specific to IT or technology."

> *"It has been a real pleasure to see the next generation of talent being made 'future ready.'" —Craig Statham*

Campbell said board members also help in several other areas as well, participating in job shadow days, in which freshmen come to SAS and see first-hand what working in technology is like by spending time with employees in IT and R&D.

Senior Software Development Manager Craig Statham is now in his third year on the AOIT board, and has found that the students aren't the only ones benefitting from the program.

"While participating as an advisory board member for the AOIT program at Apex High School, it has been a real pleasure to see the next generation of talent being made 'future ready,'" Statham said. "It's awesome to see how these young people are being inspired to enter a STEM career, but also to

see them come armed with both the soft skills and technical skills that will make them truly successful. It's an amazing experience to be able to help with that."

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> *Tim Campbell*

Campbell agrees. "I think the fact that you're able to see ... the quality of the students who come out of these programs as they're going through and graduate and move on to college, you get some gratification in having a small part of helping facilitate that growth through that student's high school career," he said.

As for Garrison, the program clearly had an impact on his education and career transition.

"[AOIT is] a good early kick starter if you're interested in technology and the STEM areas," he said. "It allows more awareness of [technology] earlier on. I already knew what I wanted to do by the time I got to college; it helped open up my eyes to technology fields."

Mom and dad gave good advice, indeed.