

# Community

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## NASA program to help MCC student aim for stars

BY JASON STONE  
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It's not too crazy for a young person to dream of being an astronaut or working for NASA. But one East Valley student who had that dream as a kid is about to get a glimpse of what it's really like to live it out.

Mesa Community College freshman Alex Krentz is preparing for a five-week experience at NASA's Armstrong Flight Research Center this summer as part of the NASA Community College Aerospace Scholars on-site program.

"I've always wanted to work for them and be a part of their team," said Krentz, 21, a graduate of Gilbert High School. "I want to join their team for good. At least this will get my foot in the door."

And what a mighty door it is. Among its massive achievements, NASA has produced the Apollo program that sent the first humans to the moon, operated the Space Shuttle program that produced countless scientific advancements and is now hoping to one day send somebody to Mars.

So, when one of Krentz's engineering professors casually mentioned the program in class one day, the inquisitive student was immediately interested.

"Growing up, I was just a huge fan of Steven Hawking and Neil deGrasse Ty-

son, and I still am," Krentz said.

Krentz said he felt a little bit "unusual" for his age because starting in junior high he started reading adult-aged, thought-provoking books.

Instead of books on sports and movie stars, Krentz's reading list included "The Trouble With Physics: The Rise of String Theory, The Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next" by Lee Smolin and Hawking's landmark, "A Brief History of Time," which Krentz said drew him in because of its discussion of "the universe and the mechanics that goes into it."

"I really didn't understand it because it was way over my head," Krentz said. "I'm hoping to get deeper into it."

Krentz said he has self-taught himself and has never even had a formal astronomy class.

"I've spent a lot of time at the library," he said.

Following graduation at Gilbert High, Krentz delayed college to take a spiritual



*(Special to the Tribune)*  
Mesa Community College freshman Alex Krentz is excited about the prospect of a five-week stay at NASA's Armstrong Flight Research Center.

two-year Mormon mission in Pittsburgh. But once he returned and enrolled at MCC, he soon heard about the NASA program for community college students.

The next step was sending in an application, which included transcripts requiring a minimum GPA, a letter of recommendation and an essay, among other things. Sure enough, out of a couple of thousand applicants, Krentz was selected among a pool of 403 community college students to take part in the experience.

The students will have a packed agenda once they arrive. Teams will split up to build a fictional company that is attempt-

ing to explore Mars. They'll develop and test a prototype rover, form a company infrastructure, manage a budget and develop communications and outreach.

"They'll learn about securing NASA internships and tour the facilities most people don't see. And they'll finish up their session with a four-day on-site event at a NASA Center where they'll get the chance to interact with NASA engineers."

"NCAS not only inspires community college students to advance in STEM fields, but it also opens doors for future careers at NASA," said Joeletta Patrick, the manager of the Minority University Research and Education Project, which is funding the program. "NCAS has a legacy of alumni moving from NASA internships to and ultimately entering the NASA workforce."

"It is rewarding to see the progression of a student from NCAS participant to NASA colleague."

After earning his associate degree at MCC, Krentz plans to transfer to Arizona State University to study either particle physics or computer science.

And, he hopes, one day soon after that he will be working for his dream company.

"I just want to help with the space program any way I can," Krentz said.

To apply for future National Community College Aerospace Scholars programs: [nas.okstate.edu/ncas](http://nas.okstate.edu/ncas)