CLAREMONT — River Valley Community College (RVCC) teachers recently received seed funding for two projects in the third round of grants from the Community College Innovation Fund of New Hampshire.

The majority of projects funded this year focus on STEM (science, math, engineering and technology) fields, and many engage students at the middle and high school level in order to build interest in college STEM pathways. The awards range from $1,000 to $8,400. Each project will serve as a pilot effort that can potentially be scaled up or shared to create broad impact across the system.

Robin Saunders, director of the medical laboratory technician program and instructor in cybersecurity at RVCC, received funding to create online health sciences lab training modules to serve students in rural areas.

“I will be creating virtual labs using animation, which will allow students who are unable to get to the school to do the same labs as students here,” Saunders said.

In order to create the animations, she became a student at RVCC in the cybersecurity and healthcare information technologies programs. Saunders was the only faculty member at last week’s graduation to receive a diploma. She is also a Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society member.

“I hope to use it as a pilot program,” Saunders said. “It has good education methodology and is interesting.”

She is planning on working on the first one this summer for use in the fall and plans to add two more courses in the spring. The labs will be for serology (study of the immune system), hematology (study of blood), and urinalysis (the study of urine).

Bonnie Akerman, biological science program director, received funding to provide a free week-long summer STEM camp for high school students in the Claremont and Keene area.

“This summer I’ll be creating the curriculum,” Akerman said. “When it is done, all the schools in the college system will get a copy of it. I’ll be reaching out to a friend at the Dartmouth School of Engineering to help with the engineering part and others that specialize in other STEM fields to help with the parts I’m not an expert in.”

The program will have a lot of hands-on activities and group-based learning, according to Akerman.
“The kids will get on campus and learn the STEM options. A lot of times kids don’t know all the options available in STEM,” she said. “A lot of people think that you need to be good with math but there are STEM options that are not math heavy.”

Akerman currently runs two summer STEM boot camps, one for kids in grades two to five and another for kids in grades six to eight. She also has a STEAM (STEM plus arts) camp in Claremont and Keene for kids ages six to nine years old.

“The camps really allow for hand-on experiences. It is great to see their excitement,” Akerman said.

Both Saunders and Akerman have received funding from the Innovation Fund for previous projects.

President Alicia Harvey-Smith is proud of the innovation coming from the faculty.

"River Valley seeks to be innovators. I'm very proud of my faculty. We are interested in creating innovative opportunities for our students," she said. "These funds are of significant importance."

A total of eight projects were selected for implementation by various New Hampshire community colleges and are designed to enhance student success and career readiness.

These projects include the establishment of a Computer-Numeric Controlled skills competition, development of a low-cost college robotics competition, development of an online instructional content for manufacturing training, a STEM "road show" for outreach and recruitment, a technology camp for middle and high school girls and a partnership with Big Brothers/Big Sisters to provide a "student for a day" program for college aspirations.