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Topper Hacks: Students compete in digital literacy challenges

BY GINA KINSLOW gkinslow@glasgowdailytimes.com   Dec 6, 2019

Aleia Kate Harper, a Barren County High School student, works with, from left, Reagan Griffiths, a Red Cross Elementary student; Karden Kinslow, a Red Cross Elementary student; and Elle Headrick, a Temple Hill Elementary student on a digital literacy project during Topper Hacks on Thursday at Western Kentucky University-Glasgow's campus.

GINA KINSLOW/GLASGOW DAILY TIMES.

GLASGOW — Approximately 70 Barren County students in fifth through ninth grades took part in Topper Hacks, a hackathon held Thursday morning at the Western Kentucky University-Glasgow campus.

BC Skills, a computer science and entrepreneurship program for students and adults, collaborated with WKU's School of Engineering & Applied Sciences Computer Science Department and Appfire, a global app development company, to do the hackathon.

"Essentially, when people think of hacks they usually have a misconception of what a hack is. A hack is a solution," said Justin Browning, project director for BC Skills.

During the hackathon, students competed in four challenges — entrepreneurship, app design, website design and BreakOut EDU.

With the entrepreneurship challenge, the students were asked to create a new company, design a logo for it, develop a branding initiative and write a mission statement.

"The new company's goal is to address digital literacy in rural areas. Digital literacy in rural areas is the theme of the entire day," Browning said. "Many of our students, if not all of our students, have had more exposure than the adults in the community and are more digitally literate just due to their generation."

With the app design competition, the students created a wireframe, which is a pathway from the landing page for the app all the way through the app so each page of the app could be viewed.

Those doing website design had to develop a website that met a digital literacy need. The BreakOut EDU competition was a digital escape room centered around digital literacy.

About 100 students applied to take part in the hackathon. Students who got to participate were chosen by a WKU panel and were recognized earlier in the week.

During the hackathon, students were allowed to choose three of the four challenges. They were grouped into teams to do the challenges.

Sean Broady, a fifth grader at Red Cross Elementary, chose entrepreneurship, app design and BreakOut EDU.

His favorite of the three was BreakOut EDU.

"It is really fun. You use digital clues and a computer to put together those clues and uncode different computer languages," he said. "For example, binary code is one of those and it uses exponents and adding to find the letters to go with it and it spells different words."

Broad said he enjoyed decoding the various computer languages.

"It really puts you to thinking and it's just a really good problem-solving thing," he said.

That particular challenge was somewhat difficult.

"We managed to breakout of the first one, but we only had 20 minutes left to do the second one," he said. "The third one was pretty difficult."

Broady and his team were not able to get out of the third one.

"We were only able to do those two," he said.

Broady's challenges, as well as those of other students taking part in the hackathon, were judged by employees of Appfire.

"Appfire (had) people on location all across the U.S. that we are sending our products to (for) judging," Browning said. Winners of the hackathon were announced Thursday night during Barren County Schools' Family Coding Night at the Innovation Zone at Barren County High School.

"What we do with Topper Hacks and Family Coding Night, … is we're attempting to build that pipeline that leads up to the place where we can raise up students who are going to have those next generational skills, the skills they are going to need to succeed," Browning said.

He explained that there are many career fields that now involve technology that didn't at one time.

"If it's a business, you've got to have tech people," he said. "Technology, programming and coding is the thread that pulls all of that together."

Emily Huddleston of Glasgow was one of several parents who turned out for Family Coding Night during where her daughter, Bailee Forbis, a Barren County Middle School student, handed her an iPad to use in controlling a robot that was moving about on the classroom floor. Forbis was a participant in the hackathon.

Afterwards, Huddleston said she supports her daughter and other students learning technology.

"I think it's a good start for everything that we have going on in our world now, since everything is electronic and computerized," she said. "I think it's a good chance to expose at an early age to what our society does now."

She also said Forbis has already started talking about the possibility of a career in computer science.

This was the first time for Topper Hacks to be offered and Derek Olive, director of continuing and professional development with WKU's Division of Extended Learning and Outreach, said the goal is to expand it throughout the region.

"Of course you've got to have partners for that to happen," he said. "Things do cost money. As long as we can find a partnership in the area, we will make it happen. Fortunately, with Barren County Skills they were able to help us make this happen. … We have to work together to make things happen."

WKU helped with the hackathon from a logistics standpoint.

"We basically help plan, organize, promote the event and then the partnership, in this case, Barren County Skills, what they do is they help bring the students and set the programming up, so it's a real working together thing," Olive said.

The winners are: Web Development — Sarah Hudson, Kira Kemper, Ella Pridemore and Luke Pierce, first- place; Eva Edberg, Cameron Shores, Marley Russell, second-place; AK Harper, Luke Harrell and Ella Hoggard, honorable mention;

App Development — Macy Garrett, Baylor Browning, Sophia Evans, Malachi Wood, first-place; Norah Shirley, Riley Wilson, Brady Wesley, second-place; Maralyn Ballard, Dalee Brooks, Kaelin Burks, Hayden Coomer, honorable mention;

Logo/Branding — Alana Houchen, Ella Hoggard, Ella Pridemore, Jaylen Thomas, first-place; Shelby Byrd, Alyssa Cooper, Logan Dickerson, Luke Harrell, second-place; Andrew Slinker, Leah Somerville, Andrew Torres, Hunter Sexton, honorable mention;

BreakOut EDU — A.K. Harper, Reid Hoffman, Jay Houchens, first-place; Kathryn Dooley, Leah Somerville, second-place; Noah Hunt, Cameron Shores and Brady Wesley, honorable mention.
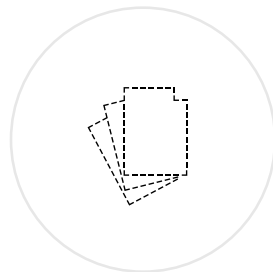
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