

Air Force cyber summit draws money to Alabama, youth to STEM field

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Most of the benefits that arrive at the end of August each year with Montgomery's annual Department of the Air Force Information Technology and Cyberpower Conference are impermanent — thousands of visitors stay for a few days, and millions of dollars are funneled into the local economy, giving local businesses some of their biggest sales days of the year.

But there's another, more long-term impact that lands quietly — cultivation of youth interest in STEM fields.

Annual impact beyond the numbers

DAFITC is a yearly technology conference that draws military leaders, IT professionals and cyber security experts to come into Montgomery from across the nation to network and share ideas on how to tackle the modern digital landscape.

The conference raked in around \$8.6 million every year for the past two years, along with over 4,500 attendees last year and over 13,000 booked hotel rooms.

Every year at the conference, there's an event called Hackathon, where high school-age kids from Central Alabama come to compete in cyber security-based challenges.

The University of Alabama's Crimson Defense Cyber Security Club hosted 2025's Hackathon, which saw students participate in a "capture the flag" competition that required the competitors to do different puzzles that center around cyber security related skills, such as cracking or creating encrypted messages, research, digital forensics and social engineering exercises, password breaking, and more.

This year, around 50 high schoolers participated — with only about five of them having ever done a

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ABOVE: Area students participate in the innovate DAFITC Hackathon & Cyber Challenge.

BELOW: Wetumpka High students participate in the innovate DAFITC Hackathon & Cyber Challenge.

MAIN: Ava Tellis, of BTW magnet High School concentrates as her team competes with area students in the innovate DAFITC Hackathon & Cyber Challenge in Montgomery on Aug. 27.

PHOTOS BY MICKEY WELSH/MONTGOMERY ADVERTISER

Hackathon

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competition of this nature before.

"I've got students here working the competition that competed in this kind of competition as high schoolers and then decided 'I want this to be my career,'" said Travis Atkison, an engineering professor at UA who serves as the faculty advisor for Crimson Defense. "... To me, that's the exciting part. There were about only three or five students that said they've competed in something like this before today, so that's another 45 students who would've never heard about this before."

Quickly developing field

Atkison was involved in the creation of the University of Alabama's Cyber Security bachelor's degree, which was announced in 2022. He said that the field has a lot of opportunities, but not all universities have a specific program for cyber security.

"As we're ramping up computing classes, cyber security is important too," Atkison said. "One of the things I had to do when creating the major was prove how they're going to use this degree... I found resources that said there were 750,000 to 1.2 million openings for cyber security-related jobs that no one was qualified for."

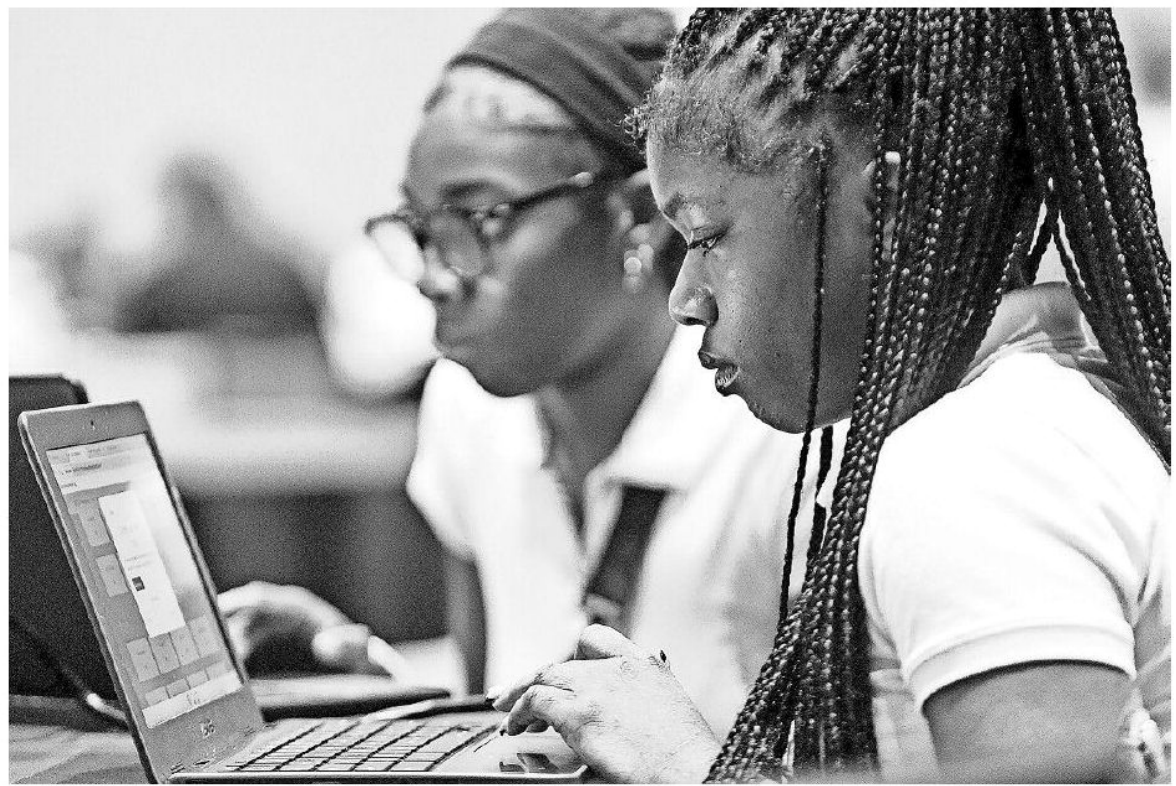
Additionally, there's more use for cyber security-related skills beyond just cyber security specific positions.

"If you think about it, every single company out there has sensitive data," said Annika Lee, a master's student at UA who served as the competition runner for Hackathon. "So that means every single company needs to have a cyber security department, or at least a contract with a cyber security company. It's hard when you don't have a lot of people trained to do that in your area."

Exposure to new things

A big factor in getting people interested in the field is making the field visible in the first place. The members of Crimson Defense run a similar competition to Hackathon on UA's campus in Tuscaloosa every year, which is one of the only competitions of its kind for high schoolers in Alabama of its scale.

"There aren't a lot of resources for getting students, especially high school-aged, into cyber security," said Lee. "What we try to do with this is we try to bring it to them. All they need is a



Coniya Harvest, right, and Jayla Carter, background, of LEAD Academy compete with other area school teams in the innovateDAFITC Hackathon & Cyber Challenge in Montgomery on Aug. 27. PHOTOS BY MICKEY WELSH/MONTGOMERY ADVERTISER

teacher to sign them up and a computer with an internet connection, and then we do the rest, that way it makes it more accessible."

Additionally, members of Crimson Defense emphasized the importance of learning through exposure.

"The main thing about the accessibility of this is that it gives you a safe space," said Emilie Pietig, a junior at UA who worked at Hackathon as a volunteer. "A lot of times when people are scared about starting something, it's because they're scared to fail. This gives you a place to fail, to fail over and over until you don't fail that last time. That, I think, sparks that joy and that passion."

Investing in Montgomery

Part of the incentive to get kids interested in cyber security, from the perspective of the conference runners, is to bolster Montgomery's economy.

"A lot of students — which, I can see it in my own son, he'll say things like 'I don't want to stay here, I've got to go somewhere else, there's nothing here for me' — we have to show them there are opportunities at all levels," said Ch-



The DAFITC is held at the Convention Center in Montgomery.

risse Stokes, the executive director of TechMGM, the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce's technology-focused ini-

tiative. "Through things like this, we can show them that there are opportunities at the entry level. In order for us to stay competitive in Montgomery, we gotta have great talent."

The winning team — a group of upperclassmen at Booker T. Washington Magnet High School — was mostly composed of students who had never competed in a competition like this before, even though the students said their high school has a lot of opportunities to learn about computer science available.

One student on the winning team — BTW senior Adam Luangkhot — even said he wanted to explore the field of cyber security more after the competition.

"Opportunities like this broaden what you can do, it makes you learn more about yourself, and look into other fields and not restrict yourself to one thing," said Ava Tellis, a junior at BTW. "You get to branch out and try different things you might like."

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