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Fetch bootcamp teaches Madison high schoolers how to use AI for good

By **Victoria Davis** | Special to the Cap Times
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1 of 2

Student Naomi Shah works with Fetch receipt quality specialist Natalie Gill to learn image and facial recognition at Mark Cuban Foundation AI Bootcamp at Fetch in Madison.

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In October, the annual Mark Cuban Artificial Intelligence Bootcamp Initiative, a program that teaches underserved high school students about AI concepts at no cost, took place simultaneously across 26 US locations from Florida to California through Zoom lessons every Saturday for four weeks. Madison's bootcamp, hosted by tech start-up Fetch, was the first and only Midwest location to participate.

"It was really exciting for us to be able to be the pioneers, essentially, in this area for it," said Emily Panasowich, who heads the Social Impact Program at Fetch. The program focuses on entrepreneurship, STEM education, and building long-lasting strategic partnerships in cities like Boston, New York, Madison, and others.

"Our Social Impact Program is relatively new here at Fetch," Panasowich said. "This is the second year that we're doing 'Fetch It Forward' and I had seen this call out for host companies for the Mark Cuban AI Bootcamp. We use AI here at our offices and we have a whole machine learning team at Fetch, so I thought this would be such a great way to open our doors, to teach something that's up and coming, something that needs young people's perspectives to realize how to harness the power for good."



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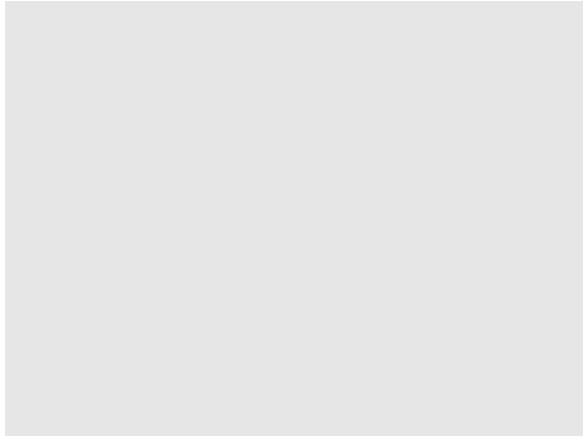
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At the bootcamp, created in 2019 by Cuban, a billionaire and "Shark Tank" personality, the students learned ethical implications and real-life applications of AI, such as TikTok recommendations, smart home assistants, facial recognition, and self-driving cars. They also learned about the features of Large Language Models like ChatGPT, which can answer questions, create original stories, and even generate computer code.

No prior experience in computer science, programming, or robotics was required and, in addition to providing free Uber transportation for the participating students, the bootcamp also offered college credit. Cuban himself spoke to the students the second week of the bootcamp about the importance of what they're learning.



Student Raj Sharma works with facial recognition AI software during the Mark Cuban AI Bootcamp at Fetch.

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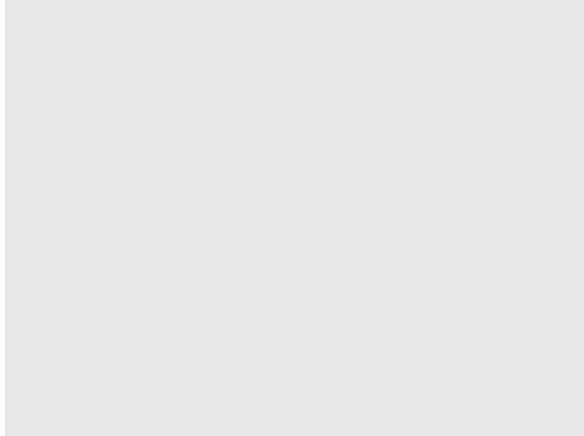
"We also had our data analytics team create data challenges, like ones about pizza, and then our volunteers worked through data visualization with the students, while they ate pizza," Panasowich said. "It's fun to see students make that connection between what's on their phone and what the people at Fetch are doing at their desks every day."

And, at the end of the final weekend, the Fetch team themselves had a little surprise for the Madison students who took part in the program: free MacBook Pros.

"Everyone in the room was so surprised," said Arina Vodyanyk, a high school senior from the Madison Metropolitan School District. She had learned about the bootcamp through her participation in a 501(c)(3) nonprofit program in Madison called Maydm, which provide girls and youth of color in grades 6-12 with the skills, experiences, and connections to pursue careers in and change the face of STEM. "During the completion ceremony, the Fetch staff gave us these heavy boxes to open at the same time, and me and another student Aria thought it was going to be Fetch merch.

"Instead, I was given a computer which I can later use for college."

"The Mark Cuban Foundation does a really great job of removing all the barriers to participation," Panasowich said. "And that was important to us as well. We have donated roughly 600 computers this year alone to different organizations, so I knew we could do the same for these seven students."



Aria Johnson, Naomi Shah and Natalie Gill manually create a system for organizing blockbuster movie titles by ratings during the Mark Cuban Foundation AI Bootcamp at Fetch in Madison.

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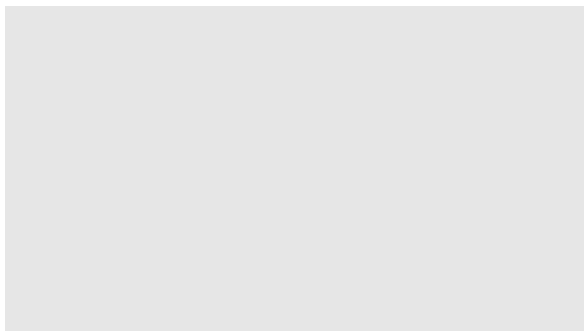
Tech is for everybody

Aria Johnson, a high school sophomore from the Verona Area School District, worked with Vodyanyk and two other female student participants on their final capstone presentation for the bootcamp. It centered around an app that, if the user inputs their dietary needs and restrictions, can scan the nutrition labels of food and note if it's safe for the app user to eat or not. Johnson heard about the bootcamp through her father Brian Johnson, a current Fetch employee, and was intrigued about the opportunity to learn the technology her father worked with, as well as explore a career field she's interested in pursuing herself.

"I had no general knowledge of AI when I came into it, but I really liked computer coding and pretty much everything having to do with computers," Johnson said. "And it was surprising to me to see that the majority of students in the bootcamp were girls. They welcomed me with open arms and we still have a group chat that we all talk through."

Eighty percent of Fetch's 22 bootcamp volunteers were also women.

"Representation matters and I'm really proud that we were able to showcase that to these young female students," Panasowich said. "It's also important for the young gentleman to see women in tech as well."



The Mark Cuban AI Bootcamp is held at Fetch in Madison.
VICTORIA DAVIS

And, of course, the lasting friendships being made weren't specific to the female students.

"It was really nice to see Bryan [Manjaly], who was sitting off by himself at the beginning of the camp, by the end of these four weeks playing shuffleboard with Patrick [Balli] and Raj [Sharma] who had gone to high school together," Panasowich said. "That kind of thing is one of the most rewarding parts of this."

Panasowich and the other Fetch volunteers plan to continue offering AI tech learning to Madison students next year, though they aren't totally certain of the format.

"The bootcamp has given us an amazing foundation and our volunteers have a lot of ideas on how to integrate our technology and our machine learning into activities for students as well," said Panasowich. "So maybe next year, it might be a combination of the AI bootcamp with Mark Cuban with a bit more Fetch on the side. I'm not quite sure. But we're definitely moving forward with finding ways to teach this machine learning to students each year."

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