



NEWS RELEASE

# Annual hackathon paves path for IT students to join American Airlines

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American Airlines hosted hundreds of students from more than 30 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) across the U.S. for the first time in Charlotte, North Carolina — an HBCU hub and the airline's second largest hub — to compete in the ninth annual BE Smart Hackathon in November themed, "All Code No Switch: Authentically Intelligent."

"American Airlines is proud to support the BE Smart Hackathon for the sixth consecutive year and HBCU students' skill development through real-life problem-solving experiences," said Chief Technology Officer Anchal Gupta. "We've seen tremendous success among students who participate in the annual event, including joining American's IT organization among other renowned corporations. Each year, we look forward to connecting students to industry professionals and providing mentorship that will inspire them to reach their career aspirations, whatever they may be."

Students from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, compete during ninth annual BE Smart Hackathon, sponsored by American.

Students brainstorming solutions to this year's BE Smart Hackathon's problem statement.

INCREASING ACCESS TO IT  
CAREERS, ONE HACKATHON AT A  
TIME

In partnership with Black Enterprise, the event is fully sponsored, helping to increase exposure to technology careers in different industries, including aviation — an important step to helping uplift students from



underrepresented communities to become influential leaders in tech.

Just this month, Tasia Bolling accepted a role as an IT applications developer at American, one of more than 50 students who has been hired from participating in the annual hackathon over the last six years. Most students hired from the hackathon join the airline through American's Development Program for Technology (ADEPT), a two-year development and rotation program for recruits hired out of college as full-time employees.

"Attending an HBCU was what I always dreamed of, but growing up, no one ever told me about pursuing a career as a software developer," Tasia said. "I initially attended Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte to earn a degree in Biology, but I lacked the passion. I was always tech savvy in our family and after an exploratory conversation with my mother, I made the jump to software development."

It was that conversation that changed Tasia's path. After her first programming class, she fell in love. Going to class and getting good grades wasn't enough for Tasia. She soon joined the university's Smith Tech Innovation Center, which would provide her with extracurricular skill building opportunities, a community of passionate students and mentorship. It's how she ended up attending the 2020 BE Smart Hackathon.

"The Hackathon not only provided me with the opportunity to build and refine my skills, but it also connected me to inspiring professionals and American," Tasia said.

Those initial relationships grew to landing interviews with American's IT recruiting team and, ultimately, the opportunity to join American's 2022 ADEPT cohort.

"Honestly, I experienced imposter syndrome coming from a smaller school in North Carolina," Tasia said. "But I was excited for the experience in a new city and didn't stop me from connecting with other students, especially with other HBCU graduates."

The company's ADEPT program promotes business and leadership skills, exposes technology recruits to the diverse opportunities American has to offer and strengthens their technical skills. They work on a wide variety of technology, whether it's technology customers interact with at airports, on aa.com or elsewhere. What's more, the program's participants have a nearly 80% retention rate with the airline.

"Some of our best team members didn't even know IT was a career path for them to begin with," said Anchal. "Investments in the BE Smart Hackathon and the ADEPT program are ways we continue build inroads for students to rewarding careers. And, what makes the programs even more special is the dedication from our team members who invest their time to care for students and showcase our culture."

For Tasia, the two programs were a special part of her career path — and the common thread through it all: community.

“I’m so grateful for the opportunities and the community that surrounds me,” Tasia said. “Going back to this year’s Hackathon is surreal. I remember being in the students’ shoes and worrying about what’s next. But what I’ve learned is to never give up, put in the work and the rest will work itself out.”

Tasia Bolling, Developer IT applications at American Airlines. (Photo credit: TO2 Photography, LLC)