



Students get with program at robotics camp

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Tribune photo by MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER

Dionne Blake, 11, test her robot during the Robotics Camp at Hillsborough Community College, sponsored by the Florida Advanced Technological Education Center (FLATE), HCC and the University of South Florida July 16.

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By YVETTE C. HAMMETT

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BRANDON - Brittany Blake and Corri Gonzalez dashed from competition track to computer screen, tweaking and testing, tweaking and testing.

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In a week, the two 11-year-olds went from having no clues about what makes a robot work to programming one and entering it in a competition against their fellow campers.

The Robotics Camp at Hillsborough Community College, sponsored by the Florida Advanced Technological Education Center, HCC and the University of South Florida, was designed to teach middle school students how robotics is used in manufacturing, specifically in the Sunshine State.

"You can use them to make DVDs, streaming video or even to pick oranges," said Brittany, a student at Mann Middle School in Brandon.

"You can even teach it to turn one way or another, based on whether it sees light or dark," added her twin sister, Dionne Blake.

Corri, of Tampa, took control of the computer on the final day of camp to adjust the settings for the program, so their robot would make the right turns at the right time.

"Their final challenge includes every program they learned all week on how to instruct the robot," camp instructor Allan Dyer said. "They have to teach the robot each particular task."

"First, you learn how to control it on the computer," said Ryan Anderson, 13, also a Mann student. "You teach it to turn or go forward or backwards."

The camp, which ran through the week of July 13, was a good mix of fun and hard work, said Austin Lukas, 12, of Randall Middle School, near FishHawk Ranch in Lithia.

"I already knew that some robots are used by the Army and some dug through the Great Pyramids in Egypt, but I didn't know anything about how to program them. It's been a lot of trial and error and a lot of

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crashing," Austin said.

"If it doesn't follow your commands, you have to go back to the computer and re-program it," Dionne said.

Much of the focus of the camp was designed to steer students toward high-paying, high-skill careers, through a new program FLATE has designed for an engineering technology degree.

Hillsborough and Pinellas counties are among the top five counties in the state for the number of manufacturing businesses, according to FLATE. Statewide, there are 16,500 manufacturing businesses.

FLATE offers programs at USF and HCC.

Reporter Yvette C. Hammett can be reached at (813) 627-4763.

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