

Heart of a Tiger: FHSU's new AI Lab levels the playing field

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Imagine trying to win a professional car race while riding a bicycle. For many college students studying computers, that is exactly what it feels like. They have big ideas for the future, but their old laptops can't keep up with the massive "brain power" needed for modern technology.

Last year, Fort Hays State University (FHSU) changed that. The Computer Science Department opened a brand-new Artificial Intelligence (AI) Research Lab. This lab isn't just a room with desks; it is a high-tech engine room that helps students build the future.

Dr. Anas Hourani, Associate Professor of Computer Science, started the lab. He knew that if his students wanted to be the best, they needed the best tools. Thanks to a special grant from the university called the President's Innovation Grants, Dr. Hourani and his research team (Dr. Daniel McClure and Dr. Magdalene Moy) were able to buy three "super-computers" that are much faster than anything you can buy at a normal store.

One might wonder, "*Why does a student need a supercomputer?*" Think about a giant puzzle with 75 billion pieces. A normal computer might take a year to put that puzzle together. But in the AI lab, students are working with huge piles of data—about 75 gigabytes worth. With the lab's power, they can finish that puzzle in hours instead of weeks.

"Before this lab, students faced a big wall," Dr. Hourani explained. "They had great ideas for AI, but their computers were too slow. It would take days or even weeks to finish one project."

Now, the lab has computers that are built like tanks. They use special parts, like the Intel i9 processor and NVIDIA RTX 4090 graphics cards (the parts that handle the heavy thinking), that stay cool with liquid pipes, just like a car engine. This allows students to teach computers how to "think" and "see" using massive amounts of data without the computer ever getting tired or slowing down.

One student who knows the importance of this lab is Monyvann Men. Monyvann grew up in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He started his college journey at the American University of Phnom Penh, one of FHSU's primary international partners. Monyvann completed his final semester at FHSU.

"FHSU was actually my very first home in the U.S.," Monyvann said. "I landed here and went straight to Hays. The professors and students became my very first friends." For Monyvann, moving to a new country was scary, but Dr. Hourani and the AI lab made him feel at home. He wasn't just a face in a crowd; he was part of a team.

Monyvann says the lab saved him more than just time; it saved him money. "As a student, you usually worry about having to spend a ton of your own money on a powerful computer just to do

your work,” Monyvann explained. “Having a lab where I could use high-end machines for free was a ‘wow’ moment. It let me focus on my research instead of worrying about the bill.”

Because the computers were so fast, Monyvann and his classmates, Chivithrokal Chan and Makara Heng, could try new things. If an experiment didn't work, they could click a button and try again immediately. This helped them learn much faster and improve their projects. Monyvann, Chivithrokal, and Makara all graduated last December. Today, Monyvann lives in Dallas, Texas. He has a great job as a Business Analyst, helping companies solve problems with his computer skills. He also builds websites on the side. Even though he is busy in the big city, he hasn't forgotten about the small town in Kansas that helped him get there.

“I’m definitely using everything I learned at FHSU to keep things moving forward here in Texas,” he said. “The foundation I got at FHSU made me ready for it.”

Monyvann even wrote a thank-you note to let people know the AI lab really works. He wanted the university to know that the “investment,” the money spent on those fast computers, is actually helping people find jobs and succeed in the real world.

Dr. Hourani isn't finished yet. He wants to make the lab even bigger. He plans to apply for more grants to buy more computers. He wants the AI Research Lab at FHSU to be a place where any student can come to build something amazing.

“The goal is to grow the lab into a larger research facility,” says Dr. Hourani. “We want to give our students the resources they need to excel in the world of AI.”

For students like Monyvann, the lab was more than just a room full of expensive machines. It was a place where they could dream big, work hard, and prepare for a bright future. As Monyvann puts it, he misses the community in Hays and is already planning a visit back to the place where his American journey began.

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