13 September 2016

Rachel Besara

Director of STEM Libraries & Research Initiatives

Dirac Science Library

205A Dirac Science Library

[Greeting] Ms. Besara,

My name is Trevor Helms, a senior Computer Science major at Florida State University and a founding member of both the RSO “Technole” and the annual hackathon at Florida State, “HackFSU”. My reason for contacting you today is in regards to the hosting of a new event being planned, “HackFlorida”, at the Dirac Science Library this Spring 2017.

HackFlorida started as a concept in our team’s mind after the conclusion of HackFSU 2016 last spring. We saw many problems with HackFSU in both how it is organized and the guiding philosophy behind the event. Before we decided to go forth with this idea, we had one question in mind: to what degree does starting a new hackathon at Florida State benefit anyone? We could talk all day about the logistical and leadership problems that HackFSU faces this year as it prepares for its fourth annual event, but at the end of the day, those things are just that: logistical and leadership. They could easily be fixed by ensuring that the teams responsible for those issues are held accountable—in other words, ensuring that the leadership actually *leads*.

In my opinion, those reasons were not enough to warrant creating a new hackathon. After all, I helped found it back in 2013 with the original crew so it is a very important event to me. In many ways, planning a hackathon back then was much more simple. No one really knew what they were doing and the culture was just becoming mainstream, so we had a very definitive role in shaping it. But along the way, I think, something went wrong when the words “culture”, “design”, “branding”, and “marketing” became the main jargon of hackathon planners.

To a large degree, “tech” has left the minds of many hackathon planners in just the past year or two. I have seen a lot of *awesome* projects at HackFSU—the creativity and talent we have in the southeastern United States is incredible. Unfortunately, it seems that now many of these truly impressive hacks are not rewarded. I recall that at a past HackFSU, one student built his own miniature weather balloon, using a Raspberry Pi to communicate back to a server that he also built and could give real time information on the weather outside. The whiteboard full of math he had written down dealing with the physics of flying the balloon and handling the weather data was incredible. But once the judging came around, that student was awarded nothing. That student put in more work, more effort, and more passion than I believe anyone else at the hackathon, but his work was passed over in favor of more “trendy” and “cool” hacks. I talked to that student afterward and he was rightfully a little disappointed. However, he was a good sport and acknowledged that the hacks that won were pretty good. Sure, they were pretty good. But since when did *pretty good* become enough to receive an award? When that student was slaving away over his calculus on his whiteboard during the hackathon, I’m sure he was excited to finally share his project and see the faces of everyone else who’s hacks paled in comparison. I mean seriously, the student was doing real *science* for his project. He wasn’t just creating another Facebook clone, it wasn’t just another iOS app, and he was not just copying and pasting code he found on the internet. But because it wasn’t something that interested people, something they could download and have in their pocket in .5 seconds, it was discredited. Given attention, yes. But truly acknowledged as *impressive*? Not so much.

I believe now marks a time where we students need to fix the broken culture we’ve adopted. There are many hackathons who get it right; it is true that not every hackathon out there has been affected by this culture. But when HackFSU has the resources to award the most “ridiculous” hack, a hack that is just a joke to the developer, but can’t award students who put passion into their projects, something needs to change. It is the HackFlorida team’s opinion that change cannot happen with the current directors and the influence of people who are too immersed into said culture. We need an event where innovation, intelligence, and passion is celebrated. Where projects are judged by how technologically impressive and difficult they were to create, not just by how well they peak the judge’s interest or how well “designed” they are. Those hacks have their place--everyone has to start somewhere. But if we spend too much time rewarding those people, we lose the confidence and respect of the more serious and advanced developers who give our event the time of day. It is time we put the tech back into hackathons and make students actually want to come to our event to further their learning process. That is why our team is proposing a new hackathon here at Florida State.

If you would be willing to give it consideration, I have attached a comprehensive event proposal to this letter that details the specifics of our event, including prospective dates, logistical information, and safety and security, among other important topics. I look forward to working with you and the FSU library staff in the coming months.

Thank you,

Trevor Helms

HackFlorida Organizer