

Heart of Tiger: FHSU Tourism students exploring new frontiers in AI-driven marketing

6/21/24

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - The John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activity Days (SACAD) at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) showcased the remarkable convergence of traditional research and cutting-edge technology. The annual SACAD event is a testament to academic rigor and the boundless potential of students who embrace innovation and collaboration. Among them this year were Cally Anderson, Marisol Banda, and Katie Hale, whose work on using artificial intelligence (AI) in tourism marketing captivated attendees and earned them the coveted People's Choice Award for Scholarly Activities.

Their research, an exploratory study on the utilization of AI for tourism marketing in the Midwest, was a project born out of curiosity and driven by a passion for the tourism industry. With Dr. Stacey Smith as their mentor, these three students conducted extensive research, navigated the complexities of AI, and presented their findings to national and international audiences.

Their research journey was not without its challenges. When Dr. Smith, a respected figure in the tourism academia, called upon FHSU members of Eta Sigma Delta (ESD) to undertake a research project for a conference in Miami, Cally, Marisol, and Katie immediately seized the opportunity, even though it meant doubling their workload. They embarked on two ambitious research projects, including one focusing on AI in tourism marketing.

The students found that AI is rapidly transforming how the tourism industry operates, from personalizing travel experiences to improving destination management and customer service. Surveying tourism professionals in the Midwest revealed a lack of awareness of and utilization of AI in the region. Their research recommended workshops and conferences to educate professionals on the benefits of AI in tourism marketing.

Their journey led them to the Eta Sigma Delta Undergraduate Research Conference in Miami, where they presented not one but two research projects—including the much-lauded AI study. Competing against prestigious U.S. and Hong Kong schools, their work was noticed and celebrated. Their dedication culminated with a Meritorious Paper Award for their AI research, setting the stage for further recognition at SACAD.

Researching AI in tourism was a new and exciting experience for these students. Marisol Banda, a student from Salina, Kansas, shared how the project helped her learn about data collection and research, something she had never done before. She highlighted the importance of embracing advanced technologies like AI to propel the tourism industry forward.

Katie Hale, a Hutchinson native, emphasized the importance of adapting to changes in the industry and utilizing resources and connections to enhance research outcomes. She credited the collaboration with her peers and professors for the success of their project and acknowledged the growth in her skills and confidence as a result.

Cally Anderson, originally from Topeka, found a passion for tourism through her studies at FHSU. She emphasized that despite the program not being research-intensive, the opportunity to engage in research projects opened new possibilities for students to explore their interests and develop valuable skills.

Dr. Stacey Smith played a pivotal role in guiding the students through the research process, helping them understand the importance of research in the industry and preparing them for future endeavors. She noted that the students' dedication and eagerness to learn were evident throughout the project, and their recognition at local and international events was a testament to their hard work.

Fort Hays State University continues to nurture future academically proficient leaders and innovators in their respective fields. Cally, Marisol, and Katie's accomplishments embody the university's commitment to fostering an environment where students can thrive, innovate, and prepare for the dynamic world ahead.

The 19th annual John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activity Days was not just an event but a celebration of the collective efforts and achievements of faculty, students, and staff. For Cally, Marisol, and Katie, it began their journey to becoming influential leaders in the tourism industry, equipped with the knowledge and skills to drive change and enhance the world with their innovative ideas.

Each step Marisol, Katie, and Cally take from this point forward builds on the solid foundation of experiences and knowledge they acquired through their research projects. They are preparing not just for successful careers but to make significant contributions to the tourism and hospitality industry, where AI and other emerging technologies will play a crucial role. Their stories remind us that pursuing knowledge, driven by curiosity and supported by a committed community, can lead to extraordinary achievements.

As Fort Hays State University continues to grow and adapt to the changing educational landscape, the successes of its students like Cally, Marisol, and Katie will continue to inspire future generations. In an increasingly interconnected and technologically advanced world, their work exemplifies the spirit of innovation and resilience that FHSU aims to foster. These events remind us that education is about learning and exploring new frontiers, embracing change, and creating a better future for all.

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