
A Hackathon How-to

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Wesley Pergament, a junior at Jericho High School in Long Island, N.Y., has had an incredibly busy summer. Along with a team of eight other high school students, including co-founder Jeffrey Yu, Pergament has been reaching out to companies, securing sponsors, organizing workshops, lining up speakers, and exploring all the possibilities as the co-founder and director of TeenHacksLI, Long Island's only active 24-hour hackathon for students, by students.

Set to launch at 3:00 p.m. on September 29, TeenHacksLI will bring together 60 teen programmers, designers, makers and leaders from New York and surrounding U.S. states for 24 straight hours of project development and innovation. "Our team really kicked it into gear this summer," notes Pergament, who has so far partnered with 15 sponsors to provide everything from drinks and food to hardware for the free event — to be held at The Coder School Syosset — and has more than 25 students signed up even before the start of the school year. "I can't wait to stand up in front of everyone at the actual event and see our six months of work pay off," he adds.

Hackathons are big business around the world, and come in all shapes and sizes, from large corporate forums and campus-based all-nighters, to smaller events like TeenHacksLI. The unifying threads? Curiosity, ideas, and loads of Red Bull. With the STEM push toward coding for all students, hackathons are taking their place on extracurricular wish lists.

Pergament has learned a thing or two about the coding culture during his months immersed in the world of computer science and programmers. He has four keywords for hackers-in-training as they learn the language of the hackathon.

1. **Collaborate.** "When people hear the conventional word "hacking" they think about a virus or someone who is hacking into your computer. It's associated with something negative," Pergament explains. "We want to change the connotation of the word "hacking" into something that means "collaborative coding." Hacking can be any project or creation that involves people coming together and putting their heads together with their skills and their computer science knowledge to create something." Those people include engineers, programmers, designers and entrepreneurs and anyone else who's curious to learn.
2. **Brainstorm.** Experts like to point out that innovation works best when it happens in teams that play off each other and exchange insights and ideas (*see side toolbar for Related KWHS Stories*). Hackathons often promote that culture. A hackathon is a safe, collaborative space for people to work together and share ideas, says Pergament. "We want to push people to communicate and collaborate. That is something that's needed in the computer science world. A stereotype is that computer science people are bad at communicating. Events like this push people to work together in teams of two to four. You can work by yourself, but at TeenHacksLI, only groups of two to four people will be eligible for prizes."
3. **Innovate.** At a hackathon, you're creating something from the ground up in 24 hours, whether it is hardware, software, an application or a website, notes Pergament, who has hung out at a few hackathons in the past year and has witnessed some memorable hacks. "One project involved an application that helped people escape fires safely. With the map of a building, it would take you to the closest exit to avoid the fire. In another example, someone created a website that helped you follow different movements like Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives and see the clothing trends of those movements. The website gave you a description of the movement and then all the apparel related to that movement. It would be easier for you to support a particular movement and to know what you were supporting." Hackathons often help to develop the seed of an idea that might become a legitimate product or service with continued time, energy and resources.

4. **Explore.** Pergament hears this a lot: “I know some coding, but I’m not sure I’m good enough to go to a hackathon.” As someone who only just discovered coding a year ago, he urges his friends and fellow hackers to feel motivated by the hackathon culture, not intimidated. TeenHacksLI has lined up workshops taught by professionals and mentors to enrich the learning for hackers of all levels. “A huge stigma of hackathons is that you’re not into computer science or it looks too scary. You’ll never know unless you try. I like to take the ‘why not?’ mentality,” says Pergament. “What’s the worst that can happen? It’s 24 hours on a weekend. Going into a hackathon with that frame of mind is imperative. I think you need to push yourself to try any opportunity you can. I’ve also heard coders say that they regret not going to a hackathon. You have fun and learn a lot about yourself.”

Wesley Pergament is co-founder and director of TeenHacksLI.