

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

## Google's Growing IT Certificate

To bolster expanding online IT certificate program, Google plans to add career resources for students and to expand its community college partnerships and pathways to four-year degrees.

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More than 8,000 people have completed the eight-month Google IT support certificate program since it launched in early 2018.

The certificate, Google's **first substantial foray** into postsecondary education, is offered through online learning platform Coursera. The tech giant's aim is to create a pipeline of diverse applicants for entry-level IT jobs.

Nearly 75,000 people have enrolled in the program, said Natalie Van Kleef Conley, a senior product manager for Grow With Google, an initiative that

aims to expand access to Google's training and tools. And Conley said the program is just ramping up. Nationwide, there are over 215,000 unfilled IT support staff roles, she said. Federal data show the average annual starting salary for these jobs is \$52,000.

By offering the IT support certificate at a subsidized price of \$49 a month for learners who don't qualify for financial assistance, Google seeks to fill an unmet need in the market while also increasing diversity in the typically white, male and college-educated tech work force.

"We know that our best work will come when the work force truly reflects the world around us," said Conley. "As we develop these trainees for the work force of the future, it's really critical that people come from many different backgrounds and perspectives."

Of the 74,596 people who have enrolled in the online program, 69 percent report that they come from backgrounds that traditionally are underrepresented in tech, including women, African Americans, Latinxs, veterans of the U.S. military and people without a college education, said Conley. Google is planning to publish more detailed diversity and student outcomes data this fall.

"That diversity has been really important for us to see," said Conley. "We know that traditionally over 50 percent of learners in massive open online courses already have a four-year college degree or advanced degree, so to attract a nontraditional learner base into a program like this is really meaningful."

### **Extra Help for Job Seekers**

The IT support role, which involves troubleshooting and solving technical issues, typically doesn't require a four-year college degree, so it "should be a strong entry point for nontraditional talent," said Conley.

When designing course materials for the certificate, Google thought a lot about inclusivity, said Conley. Pronouns of featured industry leaders are more often "she" or "they" than "he." Computer screensavers in training videos

might show “a person with disabilities, a gay couple working on their computer or a meerkat just for fun.”

Making students feel empowered also was important, said Conley. For example, rather than asking learners to imagine they are completing a task for a manager, they are told that they own a business. “It’s subtle,” she said. “But I think it’s been really important to our learners.”

Conley said that people from nontraditional backgrounds in tech may face challenges in their job search due to lower social capital. To address this, at the end of the month Google is launching a “completer community” that will include a job board, downloadable résumé templates, simulated interview practice and a virtual gap analysis so that learners can identify areas of weakness in their knowledge. Currently Google certificate grads can choose to share their résumés with 30 employers, said Conley.



A list of employers that are recruiting from the Google IT Support Certificate program.

Moving forward, Google wants to expand its employer partnerships and possibly move into new areas of tech training.

Conley said the company is working on a new project, “but it’s too soon to share.”

## **A Pathway to College Credit**

Though a job in IT support doesn't necessarily require a degree, the Google IT certificate is becoming a pathway to one. The University of London and Northeastern University already are accepting the certificate as prior learning credit for select degrees.

The University of London started offering an online bachelor's degree in computer science through Coursera in April this year. Sam Brenton, the university's director of educational innovation and development, said in an email that the first cohort included 600 students from more than 100 countries. Applicants without a strong academic background can automatically be admitted to for the degree program if they successfully complete the IT support certificate, said Brenton. They also can skip the university's introductory "how computers work" course, as learning outcomes from the Google program have been mapped against the course, which the university recognized as an equivalent.

"In the first cohort, roughly 10 percent of students joined the program through this route," said Brenton. "As the program grows over the coming years to thousands of students, we hope that this entry route offers learners around the world a route into high-quality higher education which they otherwise wouldn't have access to."

Community colleges also are getting involved, offering the certificate to their students with additional support and in-person instruction. Google partnered with an initial group of 25 community colleges in 2018 but seeks to grow that number to 100, said Deborah Kobes, director of Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit that is supporting the colleges in the partnership.

Initially, JFF reached out to colleges with a strong track record in work-force development programming, in states where there was a large demand for IT support jobs, said Joe Deegan, senior program manager in JFF's Building Economic Opportunity Group. Now the organization is preparing to expand the partnership to three new states, Colorado, Illinois and Wisconsin.

“There are some misconceptions about the certificate,” said Kobes. “Google doesn’t make any revenue from this -- it’s not a revenue share.” Google provides a grant that allows the college to offer the certificate to its students for free, Deegan said, but it’s up to the college how they choose to implement the program. JFF helps the colleges add the credential program with an approach that suits their campuses and monitors the results.

All of the colleges that offer the certificate “offer some kind of wraparound support” to the program to improve retention and completion, said Deegan. But the approaches vary widely in the level of in-person instruction, coaching and support. Some colleges are offering the course for credit as part of a degree program. Others are opening up the certificate to the local community as part of their continuing-education programs. Some are considering offering the certificate to high schoolers as part of for-credit dual-enrollment programs. Demand from learners for the certificate has been “very strong,” said Deegan, and several colleges are working to expand their class sizes in the programs. Instructors like how flexible the course is, and learners have generally found the platform easy to use, he said. But adding the credential comes with some challenges. Many colleges hadn’t worked with Coursera before, Kobes said, and setting up the technical integration between college systems and the platform was tricky in some cases.

Convincing regional employers that the certificate is as valuable as other, more established credentials has been an “interesting challenge,” said Deegan. “It’s not often that a new program like this emerges at this scale and with this backing,” he said. While the Google brand clearly is well-known, some employers are cautious about new credentials. Deegan expects this will subside as more Google IT certificate graduates get hired and succeed in their roles.

As the certificate program is so new, it’s too early to have job-placement data from the community college students, Kobes said. But many colleges are clamoring for this information.

“For now we don’t have that data, but it will come,” she said.

<http://insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/06/14/google-it-certificate-program-expands-more-community-colleges>