

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

## Nexus Degrees in Georgia

Colleges in the University System of Georgia will soon offer a new credential similar to an associate degree, featuring a flexible curriculum and specific workforce skills.

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The University System of Georgia's new "[nexus degree](#)" aims to provide flexibility and specific workforce skills for students.

The new 60-credit credential, the first of which will be offered in January, is a great concept, experts said, but could carry some risks.

The nexus degree grew out of a larger conversation about what the purpose of higher education will be in 2025, according to Tristan Denley, the system's chief academic officer. After convening a group of university representatives, employers and other stakeholders, he said the system realized that higher education needs to be more flexible, incorporate 21st-century skills and find ways to build more effective partnerships.

"The nexus degree really, in many ways, draws together all of those threads," Denley said. "It's a brand-new kind of credential that is in and of itself enormously flexible."

The state's major employers were part of the creation of the nexus degree, he said, which is designed to lead to jobs in specific industries. The system aimed to strike a balance between making the degree's curriculum flexible and relatively short in length while providing enough learning to prepare students. Because it requires 60 credit hours to complete, the degree is similar to an associate degree. It requires 42 credit hours of general education, as well as 12 credit hours of upper-division courses and six credit hours of a paid industry internship. The tuition structure for the degree would be the same as it is for a bachelor's degree at any of the 26 institutions in the system.

It's stackable, Denley said, meaning credits earned for nexus degrees count toward more advanced credentials. For example, a student could earn a nexus degree in screenwriting and then earn a bachelor's in English without wasting time and money retaking core courses or ones from the screenwriting degree program. Students can also receive industry certifications within the nexus degree, depending on the program.

Adult students could return to college to complete a nexus degree, which could move quickly if they have already completed core requirements. So far, [Columbus State University](#) plans to start offering a nexus degree in film production in January, and [Albany State](#) is planning nexus degrees in both blockchain with machine learning and blockchain with data analytics. Other institutions in the system are looking at offering nexus degrees in strategic languages or health-care fields, Denley said. When colleges want to offer a nexus degree, they must receive approval from both the state's Board of Regents and the regional accreditation agency, the Southern Association of

Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, because it is a new type of credential.

Some experts said it's encouraging to see institutions trying new solutions to help students, but that this degree isn't revolutionary.

"I think we need to be doing more things like this, and this is a step in the right direction, but this is not the dawn of a new day," said David Soo, chief of staff for Jobs for the Future.

Soo likes the mix of core requirements and skills aligned to workforce needs in the nexus degree, as well as its length and stackability, but he said the colleges will have to ensure that the degrees and embedded certifications are actually valuable.

Doing those tasks right will ensure that the colleges can adapt nexus degrees and create new ones with ease as workforce demands change.

"What fields are going to be hot in one year or five years?" Soo said.

The structure of the degree should make this relatively easy, Denley said. He compared it to Apple's App Store, which created a framework for people to create their own apps. Likewise, colleges now have a framework to build whatever credentials are needed.

Campuses are also using a mix of existing and new resources to create the degree programs by repurposing currently offered courses to be more industry-focused, and by creating new courses when necessary.

However, because the new degrees will have to go through the accreditation-approval process, it will take months to go from start to finish on a new program.

Mary Alice McCarthy, director of the Center on Education and Skills with the education policy program at New America, said the general trend toward "trying to make what students learn and do more visible is a good thing." The stackability of the degree is also a bonus.

"I think that reflects the reality that most Americans are going to need to continue their education as they start working," she said.

But the nexus degrees also carry risks, such as ensuring the certifications are valuable, which could be difficult if the judgment call is left to each individual college, McCarthy said.

"The more that you can leverage state labor market analyses to know what's going on in the state and make sure programs are well aligned, the better," she said. "It would be helpful to not expect each college to do that on its own." There's also reason to be concerned about its transferability, she said. Transferring associate degrees, which are similar to nexus degrees, to different institutions is still "very much a problem." McCarthy also questioned whether the degree could work in labor markets outside Georgia, though Soo expects it can be valuable elsewhere for high-demand fields.

Denley is confident that awareness of the degree will grow.

"My suspicion is the same thing happened when the associate degree was born in 1800s," he said. "With a brand-new credential, it will take a little while for people to become more familiar with it."

Institutions have to be aware of the other programs they're competing with, Soo said. Employers are increasingly offering training programs, and alternative providers like Coursera and coding boot camps are plentiful.

"I think that it's great that colleges are experimenting with new ways to deliver learning," he said. "But they're not the only game in town."

Despite the potential risks, McCarthy said "it's exciting" to see institutions pursuing innovation.

"We've been stuck with this one kind of pyramid model," she said. "I think institutions seeing other credential types as assets they can leverage is good."

*Read more by [Madeline St. Amour](#)*

[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/12/04/georgias-public-colleges-soon-will-be-offering-new-form-two-year-degree?utm\\_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm\\_campaign=6e1c33b738-DNU\\_2019\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1fcbc04421-6e1c33b738-198467257&mc\\_cid=6e1c33b738&mc\\_eid=0c2028f1a2](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/12/04/georgias-public-colleges-soon-will-be-offering-new-form-two-year-degree?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=6e1c33b738-DNU_2019_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-6e1c33b738-198467257&mc_cid=6e1c33b738&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2)