Google expands Howard West to train more black coders

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Last summer Howard University dispatched 26 students to Google's Mountain View, Calif., campus for an intensive twelve-week course on coding.

The experimental test run boosted students' technical chops and their confidence and now—starting in the fall—the Internet giant is opening up the program to 100 students from Howard and other historically black universities and colleges for a full academic year.

Embedding these students in the Googleplex to soak up the ways of Silicon Valley is the latest effort from the company to reverse years of hiring patterns that have resulted in a homogeneous workforce.

Tech companies blame a small pool of job applicants for the strikingly low numbers of African Americans and Hispanics working in Silicon Valley. But USA TODAY research shows that top universities turn out African-American and Hispanic computer science and computer engineering graduates at twice the rate that leading tech companies hire them.

Why the disconnect? An endless loop of new hires, boasting of childhood coding classes and programming competitions, coming from the social networks of people already working in Silicon Valley or from an elite club of universities such as Stanford and MIT.

By contrast, many Howard students get their first serious exposure to

computer science in college and few have spent much time in Silicon Valley, the tech industry's hotbed of innovation and home to many of its biggest players, from Apple to Facebook.

The Howard West program, one of many being deployed by Google to increase the diversity of its mostly white-and-Asian-male workforce, is trying to interrupt that cycle and has already yielded some results. Four of 14 participants who applied for software engineering internships are returning to Google this summer and Google says it's hopeful it will hire others.

The details of how the expanded program will operate in the fall—which schools will take part and even what it will be called—are still being ironed out. The more complicated question is whether Howard West can change demographics and attitudes, particularly at a tense moment for the Internet giant, which is in the grips of a culture war over its diversity initiatives.

Last week, Google employees who work on initiatives to bring greater diversity to the company's 78,000-plus staff complained publicly the company is not doing enough to shield them from a harassment campaign orchestrated by a small group of their coworkers. On the one hand, Google is being sued by a former engineer, James Damore, who says the company discriminates against whites, men and conservatives. On the other, it's being investigated by the Labor Department and sued by female employees for allegedly underpaying women.

A year ago when Howard West was announced, Brian Brackeen, the African-American CEO of facial recognition firm Kairos, expressed skepticism that it would boost the employment of African Americans at Google, saying the program offered "micro bridges to major gaps."

"Minorities have seen this before. Big companies looking for 'diversity'

publicity making a token donation to the cause, so that people can praise them for their commitment and consider them proponents of inclusion," he wrote in a Medium post.

Wayne Frederick, president of Howard University, one of the largest of the 102 historically black universities and colleges in the U.S., debriefed students in groups of four and five after their summer at Google.

He says Howard West is already paying dividends—and not just for the students who spent the summer drilling deep into software engineering and computer algorithms. Faculty members, energized after teaching at Howard West alongside Google engineers, revamped their courses to cover more ground at a faster clip.

Howard West was one of the factors contributing to a more than 40% year-over-year increase in computer science enrollment at the university. Over time it could expose hundreds, possibly thousands, of students from diverse backgrounds to Silicon Valley, opening up the possibility that more African Americans will find jobs in the tech industry, Frederick says.

Howard Sueing, a Google employee and an instructor in the Howard West program, says he wishes the program existed when he started at Google to help absorb the "daily dose of culture shock" he experienced in his first days at a company where 2% of the workforce is African American.

The eldest of five born in Stockton, Calif., Sueing was raised for part of his life on food stamps in Section 8 housing and had to work to help support his single-income family. He was studying psychology his freshman year at Howard University when a black female professor—one of the first black women in the U.S. to get a Ph.D. in computer science—encouraged him to switch.

The steep learning curve meant Sueing graduated with a 2.9 GPA. After graduation, he spent five years at Goldman Sachs but he never let go of his dream: working for Google. So he applied again and again. In 2015, he got hired on his fifth try.

One of Sueing's favorite moments during the Howard West pilot came while he was mentoring students who were designing and launching a Web app as part of their course work. One of the students expressed interest in being a technical lead, but was nervous about taking on such a big role. He encouraged her to do it anyway. He says she became a model for other Howard West students.

The demographics of Google—and more broadly of Silicon Valley—triggered varying degrees of culture shock for Howard students, but being completely immersed in the company accelerated the learning process for everyone, says Howard University computer science professor Harry Keeling.

"It's these students' dream to work for these tech giants. To get the opportunity to do it and to do it at the same time they are gaining credits toward a degree, it's a double win in my view," Keeling said.

The presence of Howard students also planted a seed on the Google campus. "There is an impact to their environment that these students are bringing," Keeling said, something he calls "the Howard Flavor."

Lauren Clayton is a 20-year-old computer science student from Nashville. Her math teacher mom raised her with a passion for problem solving and critical thinking. Math classes were Clayton's favorite, but there wasn't much in the way of computer science at her high school and, she says, "people don't talk about it where I'm from." Then she enrolled in an introductory computer science course the second semester of freshman year at Howard.

Getting the chance to learn directly from tech veterans on the Google campus helped her gain the skills Clayton says she'll need to land a full-time position after graduation. Her enthusiasm is contagious on Howard's leafy campus in Washington, D.C., where students routinely pepper Clayton with questions about the experience.

"It gave me an inside look at what their lives are like, the things they work on, the technology they use. I was really inspired me to work hard to get where their engineers are today," she said.

Alanna Walton, a 22-year-old computer science student at Howard who has interned at Google for three straight summers, recently accepted a job as a software engineer after she graduates. She says Howard West got straight A's from her classmates, from exploring the Google campus to visiting top tech companies such as Facebook and PayPal. Their only complaint, that the experience of working at Google may have been too authentic, with a crushing load of classes and assignments.

Last summer Walton interned at Google in Mountain View, but after graduation she's going to work for the company in New York, where the tech workforce is 7.3% African American and 9.6% Hispanic versus 2.2% African American and 4.7% Hispanic in Silicon Valley.

"When I was in Silicon Valley, I realized Silicon Valley really isn't for me. It didn't feel as inviting as I wanted it to," said Walton, who grew up in a predominantly African-American community. "New York is a little more comfortable."

Not Clayton. She's one of the four Howard West graduates tapped to return to Google next summer as a software engineering intern. And, come graduation, she says her internal compass will be pointing due west.

"Definitely Google is on the list, and I would like to be in the Bay Area. That's where everything is happening," she said. "That's the place to work if you are in tech."

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