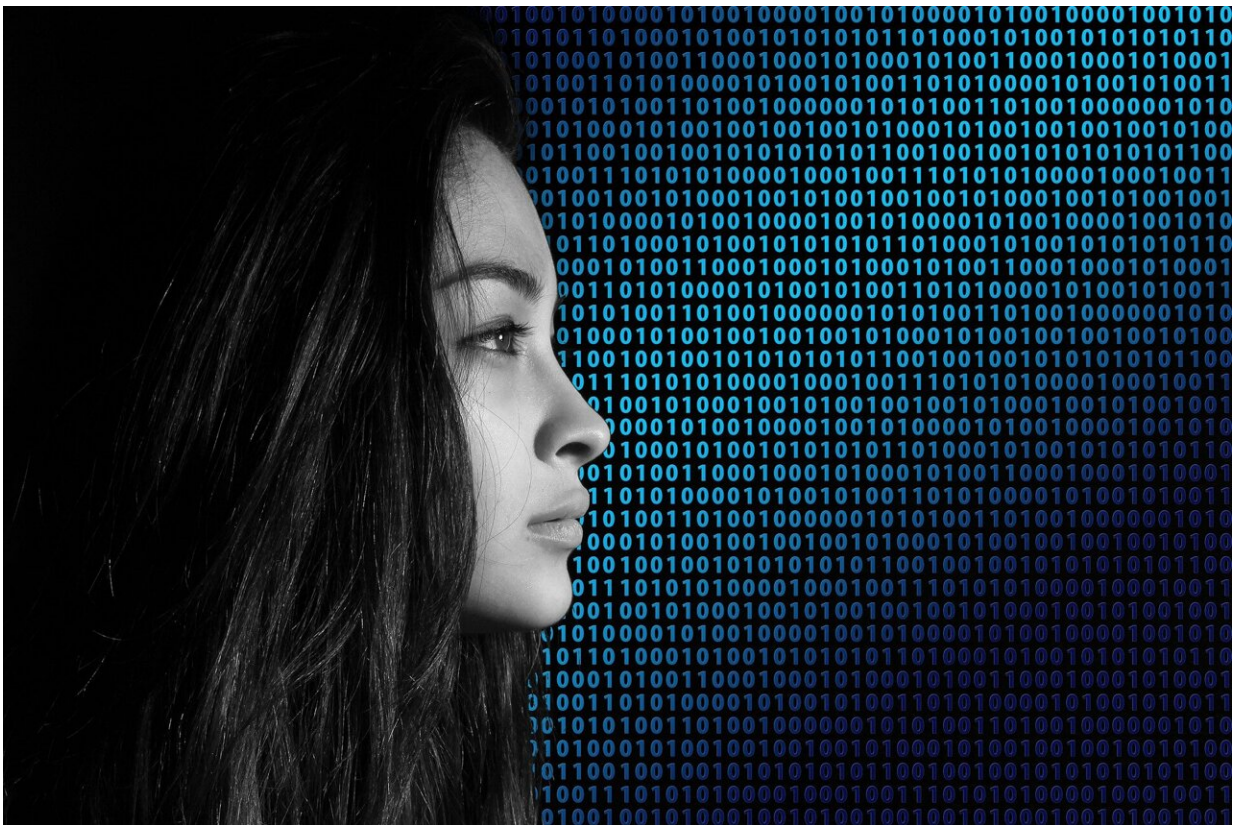


With \$10 million windfall, free Seattle coding school for women goes national to speed change in tech's 'bro culture'

June 22 2022, by Nina Shapiro



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Amber Tanaka was burned out.

Tanaka had been working service jobs to support an acting career and was coming to realize that a passion for theater wouldn't negate the grind of spending day and night in low-paid positions. Then the pandemic hit, live performances were paused and it became more difficult to find service jobs.

"I can't really afford to go back to school," Tanaka thought.

Then Tanaka, 26, heard about Ada Developers Academy, a Seattle-based coding school for women and gender-diverse adults, primarily serving people of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and those who are low-income.

Students pay nothing. And they gain a lot.

On average, they come in earning about \$40,000, including from jobs in the child care and hospital industries. And in less than a year, they can triple their salaries: The average 2022 graduate landed a job paying \$125,000, according to CEO Lauren Sato.

Now, Ada itself has come into a windfall that will allow it to expand to four other locations nationwide and attack the huge gender imbalance in the tech industry.

The nonprofit last July won \$10 million from an "Equality Can't Wait" challenge launched by Melinda French Gates' investment company, Pivotal Ventures. The one-time challenge, which awarded four such grants after a monthslong competition that drew 550 applicants nationwide, aims to expand women's power and influence.

A Pivotal Ventures executive praised Ada for its unusual "immersive" training and internship program, which falls somewhere between a traditional boot camp, typically 12 to 15 weeks long, and a bachelor's degree in computer science.

"The magic of Ada Developers Academy is that it involves an internship," said Ed Lazowska, a prominent computer science professor at the University of Washington. That's five months of hands-on experience, following six months of classroom time. The employers taking interns foot the bill: \$55,000 per person.

Sato sees Ada as "speeding up the production cycle" of programmers' development, getting them into the workforce quicker than four-year programs while offering more training than most boot camps.

"It allows us to change the makeup of the pipeline much more quickly," she said.

The coding school, which currently has 120 students, has a better chance of achieving that goal with an extra \$10 million in the bank—literally.

Ada got all of its Equality Can't Wait funding within a month of winning the award. The upfront allocation, and lack of terms specifying its use, coincides with a growing trend in philanthropy to trust organizations to carry out their missions as they see fit, Sato observed.

A flurry of activity has followed. Ada has tripled the size of its staff, to 60, and moved its Seattle campus to a new location, where it also opened a headquarters in April. Ada now occupies two chicly-decorated floors of a high-rise at the intersection of Pioneer Square and the Chinatown International District.

One class spent a recent morning learning JavaScript, a programming language, and the afternoon tackling technical challenges during mock interviews.

"I was warned that it was going to be very fast paced," said Elaine Smith, a 32-year-old who used to work in manufacturing, noting that her class

has had a project due every week so far.

Getting into Ada is competitive, and students have to show rudimentary technical knowledge. Some are self-taught.

Still, the school is flexible.

When student Camila Tagle, a 30-year-old Chilean immigrant and former finance worker, told administrators she was pregnant, they said she could delay her internship a semester to give her five months with the baby.

In the meantime, one of her two young children attends a small on-site day care while she's in class.

As students worked on this June day, Ada's all-female executive staff, in a board room named after academic and civil rights activist Angela Davis, discussed news from Atlanta, where the school already has online students and will open its first campus outside Seattle in January.

Deputy director Alexandra Holien reported what she was hearing from a staffer who went to a tech conference in the Georgia metropolis: "She said it was just a bro party."

Lonely and dismissed

That's what Ada is fighting: an industrywide bro culture, arguably less toxic in Seattle but stubbornly persistent here and throughout the country.

The share of men among the city's computer and math workers stands at almost 80%—slightly higher than a decade ago, according to census figures. Men make up about 73% of tech workers nationally.

What makes those figures even more astonishing is that women pioneered the computer field and outnumbered men for much of its history.

Ada Lovelace, namesake of the Seattle coding school and daughter of the poet Lord Byron, wrote in the 1840s what is considered the first computer algorithm. Women worked on computing for federal space programs beginning in the 1930s and for the military during World War II.

But the number of women computer science students plummeted in the 1980s, Lazowska said. There are many theories about why.

"I think it's probably a mixture of things," he said. "Part of it was that video games and home computing became a big deal. And that tended to be a guy thing. Part of it is that the computing industry has a lousy reputation for how it treats women."

"Dismissed" is the word Jennifer Carlson said she hears most frequently.

Carlson co-founded and leads Apprenti, a program similar to Ada that mixes tech training and internships but serves a broader array of underrepresented groups.

Others talk about being lonely, said Melody Biringer at an annual conference she founded for women in tech, held in Seattle earlier this month.

Case in point: Bridget Frey, chief technology officer at the Seattle-based online real estate company Redfin. Frey earned her bachelor's in computer science from Harvard in 1999, when women comprised only 10% of the program. She said she constantly felt like she was "the other" in relation to her male classmates.

The University of Washington's school of computer science and engineering has been trying hard to attract women students, Lazowska said. Representatives give presentations at sororities and cultivate relationships with high schools known for top female students, and the school has restructured its introductory curriculum to be more welcoming to students with less formal preparation.

Women make up a little less than a third of undergraduate students in the UW's computer science and engineering school. That's better than the national average—about 20% of computer science bachelor's degrees are awarded to women—but Lazowska said the UW's figure is "still terrible compared to what it ought to be."

Where is nobody else looking for talent?

Scott Case wasn't just trying to solve the tech gender problem when he co-founded Ada in 2013. He needed talent.

Co-founder of a startup called EnergySavvy, Case said it was hard to compete for workers when up against big companies like Amazon and Google.

"Where can we recruit where nobody else is looking?" he asked himself.

Tech boot camps, then emerging, were one answer. Another: "There's a whole half of the population most of tech is ignoring."

He and co-founder Elise Worthy resolved to combine solutions, creating a more intensive program designed to counter industry skepticism about whether boot camp graduates were sufficiently trained.

Ada students impressed employers during their internships, Case said, and many received permanent offers. Word spread about the program,

and big companies like Amazon and Google began joining the smaller outfits seeking Ada students.

Ada's growth comes as the [tech industry](#) is under tremendous pressure to diversify, including from the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who has repeatedly come to Seattle to prod Amazon shareholders.

Yet, Case said employers have realized of Ada: "This isn't a charity program."

Women can bring new perspectives, said Redfin's Frey. She recalled bringing in a more gender-diverse tech team to solve a tricky problem. Staffers weren't using newly developed software for scheduling tours.

The new team "took a completely different approach," Frey said. "They stopped coding. They put their keyboards down, and they just started listening."

Staffers told the coders why the software was more complicated than it seemed, and the team adjusted the software accordingly.

Redfin has sponsored 16 Ada interns and hired 14 of them, the most senior of whom has reached the third of five engineering levels at the company.

"We hire Ada engineers for the exact same roles as graduates from four-year CS ([computer science](#)) programs," Frey said.

She acknowledged that new hires with bachelor's degrees have spent more time in class. On the other hand, Frey said Ada graduates typically have more [work experience](#) and better teamwork and project management skills.

In part to account for knowledge gaps, Redfin has developed a training program for new hires.

"Investing in that has just made it possible for us to bring on a much wider set of engineers," Frey said. The number of Redfin's women tech employees has grown from just her in Seattle and a handful in the company's San Francisco office when she started 11 years ago to 37% of Redfin's tech workforce today (which remained the same after last week's layoffs).

Still, as Ada broadened its mission to focus more on women of color, it found its graduates were not all achieving the same success. Notably, employers were offering students of color lower salaries.

"We just went to all the companies and showed them the offer data by different demographic slices," Case recalled. He said that fixed the problem among Ada graduates, but Sato isn't so sure and noted there's plenty of evidence in the industry about people of color being paid less than their white peers.

And all that happened in the Seattle area—"our own little bubble," in the words of Danielle Ishem, Ada's vice president of equity and policy. She said expanding nationally, with the help of its \$10 million grant, will bring new challenges.

For instance, gender-neutral bathrooms, important to Ada and its gender-diverse students, are a hot political issue in some places, including Georgia.

Abortion laws present another quandary. Ada is considering moving into Texas, Ishem said, but has qualms about abortion laws like those that would ban the procedure outright if the U.S. Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*.

To some extent, Ada creates its own welcoming environment, requiring managers at companies taking interns to attend a 12-session digital course on inclusivity, and offering social justice curriculum to students.

The school is nevertheless struggling with where it wants to be, Ishem said. So far decided: After Atlanta, Ada's next destination is Washington, D.C.

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