



Closing the Opportunity Gap in Tech Recruiting

An Invitation from 11 CS/IT Baccalaureate Programs



In partnership with



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Hiring managers recognize there are more jobs than Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) graduates to fill them. In addition, technology companies are interested in developing a workforce that broadly reflects their customers and stakeholders. They understand that individuals from diverse communities often bring a fresh perspective and creativity to problem-solving. Employees who have developed critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and other durable skills through a variety of life experiences are in high demand.

Take Matin Mirzaei, for example, who immigrated to the U.S. to flee religious persecution in his home country of Iran. He started with an English language program at his local community college. A gifted designer, he gravitated to studying web applications and completed his associate degree (AAS) in three years. Matin continued with his education, completing a bachelor of applied science (BAS) degree in software development with a [capstone project developing SwiftUI prototypes](#). Though he was hired into a data specialist role based on his AAS degree, he has yet to secure a position that fully utilizes his talent for UI/UX design and the skills acquired in his bachelor's degree.

Skilled individuals like Matin are often overlooked or excluded as potential candidates because open-access institutions like community and technical colleges typically aren't considered by the tech industry when looking for software development interns and new hires. Instead, tech companies have historically recruited new talent from nationally known colleges and universities or bootcamps. These programs generally require a full-time commitment, prior academic success, and significant financial backing. This creates a large opportunity gap for students who have minimal support and/or full-time family and work obligations, or who are first in their families to attend college. These circumstances often create obstacles to obtaining tech jobs, even though these students' diversity of experience is an asset to the industry.

These individuals make up a large percentage of the student body at Washington state community and technical colleges. [AppConnect Northwest](#) is a consortium of these colleges in the Puget Sound area with baccalaureate degree programs in Computer Science and Software Development. AppConnect NW strives to bridge the gap between colleges and the tech industry. By working together as a consortium, AppConnect NW provides access to a large, diverse pool of graduates with key industry knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Our graduates are presented with unique barriers as they begin their careers in tech:

- Many companies are unaware that community and technical colleges offer four-year degrees in software development.
- Online job and internship application forms may not include our graduates' schools in their list of colleges.
- Tech recruitment efforts for jobs and internships are concentrated at universities where companies have established connections, bypassing our students.
- Inquiries and applications from program graduates are filtered out early in the process; consequently, they don't reach hiring managers.
- Our individual college programs are small, with minimal resources, faculty, and staff to support students in obtaining internship/job placements.
- Since our tech bachelor's degree programs are relatively new, graduates cannot rely on program name recognition or established alumni support to provide coaching, mentoring, and industry connections.
- Many of our students do not have a personal network of professionals in the IT industry.
- Our students often cannot participate in unpaid internships or paid summer internships that require them to step out of their current job, relocate, or take on a longer commute.
- Once accepted to an internship or position, our diverse graduates often have limited access to appropriate professional mentoring.

Innovative Collaborations

For the past six years, AppConnect NW has collaborated on innovative projects that explore ways to overcome these barriers:

WTIA: Collaborating Consortiums

Washington Technology Industry Association (WTIA) has been vital in providing introductions and building connections within the tech industry. The collaboration has also included a virtual job fair specifically for AppConnect students during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most recently, WTIA created a college and industry council that allows for tech companies and colleges to meet, share information, and collaborate. [Learn more about WTIA.](#)

CodeDay Labs: Project-based Internships

The non-profit CodeDay takes a bit more structured approach with CodeDay Labs. Described as a “100% online tech internship for everyone,” the six-week summer program matches three students at similar skill levels with a mentor from a leading tech company to collaborate on an open-source project. Students can also participate in regular tech talks, career panels, and sessions for interview practice and professional networking.

Students from AppConnect NW programs have found the structured learning process and variety of projects provide a solid venue to bring their experiences and skills to life. The condensed timeline (6 weeks) and focused work (30-40 hours per week) allow students to build their experience by moving quickly from coursework to application.

Mentors inTech: Capstone Mentorships

According to its founder Kevin Wang, [Mentors in Tech \(MinT\)](#) is about building bridges between “overlooked and accessible colleges” and the tech industry. Recently featured in an article on Geekwire.com, MinT creates opportunities for companies to access a new employee talent pool by using a structured mentoring program with volunteer, industry mentors.

MinT has also developed an industry partner program as a low-cost alternative to traditional summer internships. MinT establishes a solid foundation by building a structured, project-oriented relationship between students, faculty, and industry partners. The program model culminates in a paid, industry-sponsored capstone project. Several AppConnect colleges have been actively involved in pilot testing and development of MinT’s mentorship and industry partner programs.

Lastly, MinT has created tailored recruiting that connects employers directly to students. This work has resulted in students being supported through their job search process, and ultimately, finding full-time roles.

New Technologists: Early Engagement

[Cyborg Mobile](#), a Seattle-based technology and management consultancy, has helped clients reimagine an inclusive approach to recruiting. In partnership with Microsoft, Cyborg Mobile launched [The New Technologists Summer Academy](#) nine years ago as a radical commitment to investing in overlooked talent pools. Structured as a seven-week paid internship, the summer program accepts applications from students finishing their first or second year of college. Outreach focuses on students from historically-overlooked schools like community colleges; historically Black colleges (HBCs); and small, rural programs.

Working with Cyborg Mobile and Microsoft staff, AppConnect faculty continue to develop program curriculum, teach in the program, and collaborate on student/mentor engagement. Microsoft’s support for the program has been rewarded by impressive retention and conversion rates to full-time employees from an incredibly diverse pool of tech talent.

Forward Together

Academic institutions and the tech industry acknowledge that women and students of color are underrepresented in the field. We regularly blame poor retention and the lack of diversity in prospective student and candidate pools. To move forward, both colleges and industry must reevaluate internally and collaborate externally to open opportunities for these well-qualified, incredibly talented individuals to contribute to our collective success.

The **AppConnect NW** consortium of open-access colleges takes this challenge to heart. We continue to examine the barriers embedded in our administrative processes and teaching practices and ask why we can serve some students, but impede others. We continue to assess and expand policies and procedures for outreach, enrollment, retention, and support for our diverse students.

We recommit to advising, teaching, challenging, and enabling students to embrace career advancement opportunities in the tech industry.

To our industry partners, we ask that you commit to reassessing your outreach and hiring practices and reimagining how you can build professional teams that represent the breadth of your users' and stakeholders' life experiences. What if you:

- Engaged with smaller, non-traditional colleges as consortiums rather than individually to identify barriers, build relationships, and connect with potential hires?
- Collaborated with industry partners to expand access for diverse candidates rather than competing for the few that make it through the current recruiting system?
- Developed meaningful relationships with students earlier, building connections at the freshman/sophomore level?
- Provided supported transitions into work at your organization through paid internships, mentorships, sponsorships, and work-based learning opportunities?
- Offered opportunities for applied learning projects for student/employee collaborations and student capstone mentoring?
- Supported deeper industry-academia exchanges like industry advisory committee membership, adjunct teaching, on-campus tech talks, faculty sabbatical experiences, and collaboration/feedback on new program development?

Envision the innovation and integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion that could result if more tech companies engaged in these best practices.

AppConnect NW continues to be energized by the diverse group of students we serve and the gifts they have to offer Washington's tech industry. We are inspired by our collaborations with creative industry partners working to close these gaps, however, we recognize that the work ahead requires many more hands. We hope you'll consider coming on board.