



What the Tech Hiring Market Wants: Bachelor's Degrees or Community College?



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Higher education has been in the spotlight as of late - and not just because it's commencement season. Student debt has grown to yet another all-time high this year. The [Wall Street Journal](#) recently reported that 70 percent of the Class of 2016 will be graduating from their respective universities with an average of \$37,172 in student debt for a 4-year education. Which is making it only harder not to put the viability of a bachelor's degree into question.

The reality is, attending a 4-year school isn't feasible for everyone. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), 44 percent of people pursuing a post-secondary education attend community college and finances play a role.

While this significant proportion of students are avoiding the steep fees associated with bachelor's degrees, they could be missing out on other opportunities. Essentially, are they ultimately paying another cost? Who is better off?

We spoke with Phillip Ellison, a co-founder of the edtech startup [ULink](#). Ellison, who is currently a student at Tufts, received an associate degree at a community college in the Bronx, New York, after his initial plan to earn a bachelor's degree from Penn State was derailed. Now, with ULink, he and his fellow co-founders - Parisa Esmaili and Jubril Lawal - are trying to give students at community colleges a platform for the transfer advising resources they always wished for.

"I have a non-traditional path to Tufts," Ellison told us. He continued to share that around the time of the financial crisis, his father passed away while he was at Penn State. His mother found herself out of work, so with a lack of healthcare and financial aid, Ellison had to leave the university. He started attending Hostos Community College and it allowed him to take classes and work at the same time - first in manual labor, but later in education and politics.

"I never thought that's where I'd end up," he confessed.

Where the Resources Run Dry

Even though community college served its purpose, Ellison internally still wanted to earn a bachelor's degree. That's where he encountered the confusion that is the transfer process. Community college students who finish a 2-year program can apply to transfer to 4-year schools, where they would complete their bachelor's. According to Ellison, students vastly outnumber guidance counselors and the process of transferring isn't clear. From his personal experience and those of his co-founders, they were inspired to form ULink, which will provide personalized, online guidance tools for community college grads looking to transfer.

"There are countless opportunities for students at universities," he said. "But what about the smart people at community college who don't have access to the same resources and networks? They're often forgotten... There are huge gaps in these education systems."

Community college students may not have access to an abundance of resources to help them transfer into a 4-year school, but they may want to question whether they should be trying to transfer at all. The sheer debt incurred from a Bachelor's degree, mentioned above, is one consideration. But the education expectations of hiring managers are another.

How Hiring Managers in Tech Really Feel About Education

The general hiring market in tech has become more flexible with the educational requirements it places on job candidates. We've borne witness to coding bootcamps becoming increasingly popular among students and hiring managers alike. It's no coincidence: a share of IT and startup hiring managers are becoming more open-minded about people who have associate degrees or certificates, have taken classes or are even self-taught in tech.

"I think we're seeing a trend in the market, outside certain sectors like finance and law," said Tyler Stanyan, a senior account manager at Boston-



based staffing firm AVID Technical Resources. "There's a general emphasis on work a candidate has done and can do, instead of their education... There's been a big change even in the past year."

"Smart hiring managers are interviewing people for potential, not for the degree listed on their resumes," seconded Sean Dowling, a partner and manager of recruiting strategy in the technology contract staffing division of WinterWyman. "They're looking for experience versus education."

That's not to say everyone is gung-ho about job candidates coming from community college or bootcamp programs. There are still some firm believers that a Bachelor's degree is required for even an entry-level job.

"I think it's very specific to the company and the skill set. There's no one size fits all," Dowling shared.

"A bachelor's may still put someone above people with certificates or associate degrees. It varies by company, to be honest," Stanyan told us. But he emphasized, "IT is such a good industry for people to be in, and there are so many programs outside of universities that can get them a job within days of obtaining a certificate."

Considering the Cultural Cost

With all of that said, there are reasons unrelated to finances and job prospects that cause bachelor's degrees to be coveted. Education and learning hold worth in the cultural sense and, as in Ellison's case, there are still some people who've always dreamt of earning a 4-year degree.

"My father was an entrepreneur," Ellison said. "I understood his trajectory... For me, I knew I wanted to go to a Tuft's caliber institution. It would give me the education and resources to move into the innovation economy."

Nowadays, many universities realize higher education has to evolve to meet the demands of the hiring market, especially if graduates have to climb their way out of debt. If you just take a look at Boston, institutions are investing money in curricula, programming and resources to support student innovation and entrepreneurship. If this trend continues, tuition for a 4-year post-secondary education could be viewed more like the start up costs of a business or an invention, making it even more appealing for some students.

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