

Amazon Gift Signals Confidence in Community Colleges

The company is giving \$3 million to kick-start a computer science bachelor's degree program at community and technical colleges throughout Washington State.

By Suzanne Smalley // January 4, 2022

Amazon is funding a pilot that will support the launch of new computer science bachelor's degree programs at community and technical colleges in Seattle and across Washington State, an investment meant to address a workforce shortage plaguing the e-commerce giant and other employers who can't find qualified candidates for unfilled computer science positions.

While [half of U.S. states](#) now allow community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, experts called the \$3 million Amazon investment significant in part because the company has said it plans to hire many graduates of the program, signaling that a [Fortune 100 company](#) believes it can find top talent at community and technical colleges. The Amazon money will be split among three entities, with \$1 million going to Seattle Colleges, the city's community college system; \$1 million going to the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges to develop curricula to help launch computer science degrees at community and technical colleges across Washington State; and \$1 million going to the Washington State Opportunity Scholarship to benefit students pursuing STEM-related bachelor's degrees.

Washington State imports four times as many computer science grads as it creates, according to State Senator [Joe Nguyen](#), who championed the new legislation allowing the state's community and technical colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in computer science. Nguyen said he sponsored the bill in part because the technology sector in Washington currently has more than 24,000 job openings, which mostly require a four-year bachelor of science degree in computer science. Just 1,883 computer science degrees were awarded in the state during the 2018–19 school year.

[Shouan Pan](#), chancellor of [Seattle Colleges](#), said the three community colleges in his system will use the new bachelor's program to draw diverse students who excel in STEM programs at Seattle Public Schools. An estimated 278,000 students attend Washington's 34 community and technical colleges each year, and nearly half of them are from underrepresented backgrounds. [Carli Schiffner](#), the deputy executive director of education for the [State Board for Community and Technical Colleges](#), said computer science enrollments in the state's community and technical college system are increasing even as overall enrollment declines.

Pan called the Amazon gift a "game changer," even if it is not as large an investment as it might have been.

"It has a symbolic impact to say, 'We believe in community colleges,'" Pan said. He added that Amazon has been criticized for not being a "greater corporate citizen," so

the “whole donation is a very good, strong step forward.”

Pan noted that Seattle Colleges have worked with Amazon before, citing past support from Amazon Web Services, which has helped develop curricula and donated technology products to support a cloud computing certificate program. But he said the \$1 million in seed money to create a computer science degree program is significant, particularly because of the emphasis the company is placing on training local students from diverse and underserved backgrounds.

Pan said that he wants to nurture more homegrown talent to fill the many tech jobs that remain vacant at local companies such as Amazon and Microsoft.

“We have to grow local talents,” Pan said. “We want to work with Amazon, Microsoft, any large operations, because no one can do it alone.”

Still, he said the path ahead is daunting because Seattle Colleges will need to find faculty members it can pay competitive salaries and to launch a new program in eight months in time for the start of the fall 2022 semester. System leaders are hopeful that additional tech companies will support the work over the longer term and that Amazon will increase its initial investment to sustain the program.

“There’s a lot of work to be done,” Pan said. “They are infusing this million dollars—it’s seed money. It will get us started.”

[Mary Alice McCarthy](#), director of the Center on Education and Labor at the center-left think tank New America, said the gift demonstrates Amazon believes it can recruit a large pool of talent from open-access colleges in its own backyard. She said there are not many four-year institutions in the Seattle area that are not extremely expensive private colleges—and many of them are more selective. But she said many employers remain skeptical that community colleges can deliver quality bachelor’s degree education, particularly in technical fields like computer science.

“It’s just a real sign of validation that Amazon trusts that the community and technical colleges of Washington State, and specifically the Seattle area, can deliver good baccalaureate education and generate graduates that they would be willing to hire,” McCarthy said. “Amazon just made a big statement that they consider this a very valid pipeline. And I think that’s really important.”

She noted that California being on the cusp of potentially launching bachelor’s degree programs at community colleges makes the Amazon investment a “very important signal” for other tech companies and large employers. She said recruiting from community colleges will allow tech companies to diversify their workforce, which has traditionally been largely white and male.

“In terms of addressing that diversity issue, of providing more opportunities for low-income and minority communities to get into those pathways to good tech jobs, the community college is the place to be,” McCarthy said.

[Victor Reinoso](#), who runs Amazon’s [Future Engineer](#) program, said Amazon advocated for the legislative change that made the new bachelor’s degree program possible. Amazon Future Engineer is a childhood-to-career computer science education program that is designed to target students from underrepresented communities. He said the \$3 million is an initial investment and Amazon will consider donating more if the model

proves successful.

Reinoso said four-year colleges in Washington State only graduate about 2,000 computer science graduates a year in a field where 20,000 jobs are vacant in the Seattle area alone. He said Amazon also wants to invest in rural students in the eastern part of the state, making community and technical colleges that are spread throughout the state attractive partners.

"If we want to reach more diverse students, we need to reach them where they are," Reinoso said. "The student population in the community college system in Washington State and elsewhere trends more diverse than the four-year college system, and that is a priority for the company."