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CODING BOOT CAMPS ATTRACT TECH COMPANIES

Employers are increasingly hiring graduates from nontraditional schools like Flatiron

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NEW YORK—In a graffiti-splashed classroom in lower Manhattan, students are learning to write computer code at a private academy whose methods and results have caught the eye of Silicon Valley and the Obama administration.

The Flatiron School's 12-week course costs $15,000, but earns students no degree and no certificate. What it does get them, at an overwhelming rate, is a well-paying job. Nearly everyone graduates, and more than nine in 10 land a job within six months at places like Alphabet Inc.'s Google and Kickstarter. Average starting salary: $74,447.

Employers are increasingly hiring graduates of the Flatiron model—short, intensely focused curricula that are constantly retailored to meet company needs. Success, its backers say, could help fuel a revolution in how the U.S. invests in higher education, pushing more institutions toward teaching distinct aptitudes and away from granting broad degrees.

The Obama administration will soon allow an initial batch of students at private academies like Flatiron to spend federal grants and loans, a sharp break from the normal requirement that institutions first win approval from regional accreditors.

Ted Mitchell, the Education Department's undersecretary, says the pilot program represents a shift toward getting government to focus "in a laserlike way on outcomes," rather than on simply increasing Americans' access to college.

It is also part of a push to more closely align learning with the economy's needs, as graduates leave school owing student debt but struggle to find jobs in their desired field. Students—many in their late 20s and 30s—are increasingly looking for shorter educational experiences that offer a greater assurance they will find a job afterward, educators say.

Flatiron, a for-profit school, has seized on a clear need in the economy that some academic experts say reveals a failing among traditional universities. As more companies shift tasks and products online, some say they are having trouble finding workers who know how to design software efficiently. The Labor Department projects software-developer jobs will grow 17% in the next decade, more than double the growth of overall employment, and a shortage of developers has already driven up industry salaries.

But there is also skepticism about the ability of the academies to replace the four-year degree.

Google, which has hired workers from Flatiron and other academies, recently studied the efficacy of coding camps. The company found that while the camps have shown promise, most of their graduates weren't prepared for software engineering without additional training or prior experience, Maggie Johnson, Google's director of education and university relations, said in an email.

"In a broader sense, most of our hires have [computer science] degrees because we prefer to hire generalists who can work on any type of product or service. Bootcamp alumni tend to be more specialized," Ms. Johnson added.

Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor of higher education at Seton Hall University, says coding academies offer an alternative to traditional degrees, but is skeptical the model can work broadly outside of technical fields.

"The bachelor's degree is still critical," for a broad base of knowledge, said Mr. Kelchen. He pointed out that most coding-academy graduates already had bachelor's degrees. The rise in the academies largely reflects more college graduates returning to school for new skills.

Flatiron said it accepts only 6% of applicants, making it almost as selective as Harvard. The typical coding-boot camp student was 31 years old and had nearly eight years of work experience and a bachelor's degree, according to Course Report, an industry group.

Sandy Bleich, a technology-industry recruiter, says that for years a bachelor's degree was enough to signal to employers that a candidate was competent and would succeed. Now recruiters like she are increasingly looking for someone with hands-on experience, especially in technology, where software is constantly evolving.

"Having a good degree is just not enough," she said.

At Flatiron, students spend 10 to 12 hours a day for 12 weeks on projects such as building a duplicate version of online-review site Yelp from scratch. The school's staff calls tech firms throughout the week, both to promote their graduates' abilities and to learn employers' constantly shifting needs, including what software they use.

When Apple Inc., for example, announced in 2014 a new programming language for its products, Swift, Flatiron adjusted its curriculum within days, says co-founder Adam Enbar. Getting such a change in traditional colleges can take years, given that it would likely need approval from college officials and accreditors.

Mr. Enbar, a fast-talking 33-year-old New York native, points out that the school has no cafeteria or glitzy dorms. On a recent afternoon, dozens of students chatted quietly and worked at large computer screens as an instructor looked on. In a nearby room, recruiters from tech companies met with soon-to-be graduates. The typical class has about 30 students; since Flatiron opened in 2012, more than 700 people have graduated from the academy.

The school is attracting students like Sharnie Ivery, 24 years old, of Brooklyn.

He enrolled in Flatiron, where he graduated in 2014, and quickly landed a job making $70,000 a year for an internet startup. He was recently hired by a more established tech firm with a raise. "Had I not gone to Flatiron School it would have taken me four years to get to this point and I would have possibly left with huge debt," he says.