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How Tech Companies Woo Higher Ed (and What They Seek in Return)

By [Tina Nazerian](#)

Dec 27, 2017



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Gifts are plentiful during the holidays. But Christmas came early for some higher-ed institutions in the form of freebies and discounts from big technology companies. Amazon gave Echo Dots. Apple also reached out with iPad Pros and other hardware at a discounted rate.

Charitable? Perhaps. But these efforts are part of a longer-term strategy for these companies to train future workers in their technology.

In August, Amazon [gifted](#) 1,600 Echo Dots to engineering students at Arizona State University living in a new dorm. John German, an ASU spokesperson, said at the time that the university’s motivation was to develop an opportunity for its engineering students to get skills in the “emerging field” of voice technology. An Amazon spokesperson explained in August that Amazon officials imagine a world where their devices are entwined in student life.

To push these efforts further, Amazon launched the Alexa Prize, a research competition where university teams developing new ideas for conversational artificial intelligence can get monetary prizes. A team from the University of Washington [won the 2017 competition](#), getting \$500,000. Applications are now open for the 2018 competition.

Apple, too, tried to woo universities this year. In October, the company and The Ohio State University announced a multi-part collaboration. [Starting in fall 2018](#), each first-year student will get an iPad Pro, an Apple Pencil, a Smart Keyboard, AppleCare+, a case and a full suite of apps. At the time, Benjamin Johnson, the university's director of media and public relations, said the retail value of each iPad and associated technology was more than \$1,000, but the university will pay a discounted rate.

Plans are also [underway](#) to open an iOS design laboratory on OSU's Columbus Campus, which will train and certify students interested in developing apps in Swift, the programming language designed by Apple. The company is pushing the coding language even further, having [announced](#) in May an app development curriculum in Swift for high school and community college students. Some of the community colleges involved include Houston Community College, Mesa Community College and Harrisburg Area Community College.

For Phil Hill, an edtech consultant and blogger at e-Literate, it's no surprise that big tech companies want college graduates to be familiar, if not well-versed, with their tools. He says these companies want to fill the gap "between traditional corporate training and higher education," creating a "tighter connection" between students getting a college degree and an initial job with the needed skills.

It's not a new endeavor by any means. Hill remembers that in the 1980s, Sun Microsystems provided workstations for university students. The company's [business plan](#) explicitly stated under its marketing approach to put "SUN workstations into selected universities to gain visibility." The idea, says Hill, was to get people "sort of hooked on using Unix" and programming skills that could be used in the workforce.

Sun also worked closely with schools to establish physical training centers. In 1999 the company and the University of Pittsburgh [opened an "Academic Java Center"](#) meant to train and certify students in Java technology.

Hill expects the "Big Five" tech companies—Apple, Amazon, Google, Facebook and Microsoft—to continue their outreach to colleges and universities next year.

Another higher education outreach forthcoming in 2018 may come from Google, which offered a peek at its virtual reality platform, [Daydream](#), earlier this year at EDUCAUSE, a major higher-ed conference. Currently the company is soliciting interest from institutions interested in piloting the Daydream. According to the [form](#), those who are selected will get a six-month loan that includes, among other things, a [Google Jump camera](#) and a [Google Expeditions kit](#).

According to a Google spokesperson, the higher ed pilot will launch sometime in 2018.

Behind these companies' efforts to train future talent is an element of competition. There are different tools and platforms competing for users and developers, whether they're for mobile devices (iOS versus Android) or virtual reality headsets (Daydream, Oculus, Vive). One risk that Hill raises is the desire for these companies to "lock people into their ecosystem and platform."

Yet the reasons behind corporate efforts to get involved with higher education aren't entirely selfish, Hill says. He doesn't discount their altruistic motivations, but thinks their business models of keeping consumers in their ecosystem and platform is problematic, and one schools need to be careful about.

"The more students, the more people entering their workforce already knowing their language, or their platform, or wanting to work for them or work in that ecosystem, the better off it is for [the companies]," Hill explains.

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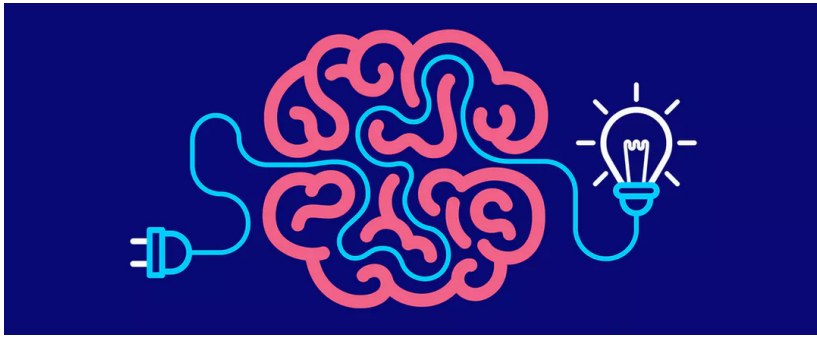


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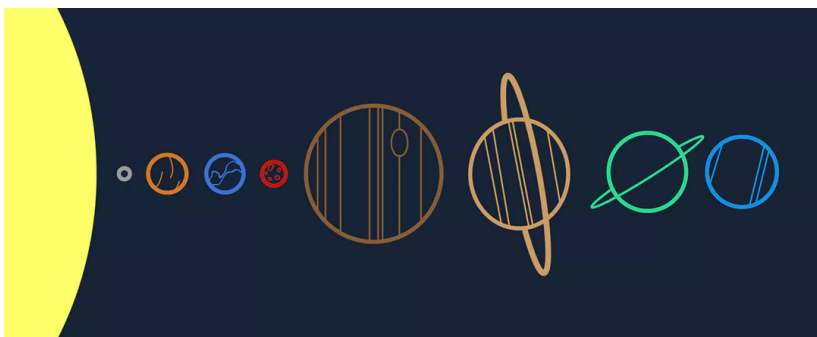


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