



SiliconCoast™

NW Florida is IT

Following the economic trends in the rest of the state, tourism is NW Florida's number one industry, generating billions in revenue. According to VisitFlorida.org, the region received over 14 million visitors in 2014, or 15% of the state's total. In fact, a one-mile stretch of Hwy 98, from Destin's Target to the Emerald Grande, is responsible of \$1 billion annually, with no signs of slowing down.

The huge downturn occurring after the BP oil spill, however, shows how vulnerable the region is to outside forces, and diversifying the economy has become a focus of many stakeholders from Pensacola to Panama City. And rightly so. Depending on an annual influx of visitors from feeder markets such as Atlanta, Dallas, and Nashville means our businesses depend on those economies to remaining strong. Bad times for Oklahoma oil rigs translates to fewer visitors to the region. It's basic economics, and the times, they're not only changing, they're telling us the time to act is now.

Here's an idea. What if we gathered government leaders, business owners, and economic strategists to pitch the tech world that NW Florida is serious about IT? What would happen if colleges and universities around the world knew that, like Silicon Valley (CA), Silicon Alley (NY), and Silicon Prairie (TX), we're seeking IT and tech support workers? Along with the beach, emerald waters, and a low cost of living, we were expanding our economy by offering substantial economic incentives?



Currently, Fort Walton Beach is in the midst of such a conversation, and that's a good thing. While it's as plain as NW Florida's sugar white sand that the tech industry is booming, outside of those places mentioned above, many college graduates find themselves without solid employment after four years of expensive schooling (see article below). ***Let's market to the IT industry using the same effective methods we implement for tourism.*** The difference being, unlike tourists, these folks will stay, buy homes, and grow our economy outside its current scope.



Creating Ladders of Opportunity

- Girlswhocode.com can set up a satellite office here, and daughters of local military personnel can prepare for their futures in a safe and familiar environment.
- Teens and 20-somethings visiting with their parents will discover reasons for them to move to the area.
- When young women and men relocate here, their relatives and friends will follow, if only to check out the area. This influx can help fill the thousands of service and hospitality industry vacancies we face each summer season.
- More industries will set up shop here, taking advantage of Florida's friendly business climate, no state income tax, and (finally) an abundant supply of eager employees.

Too many positive transformations to mention here, but you get the idea. With the help of your office, thought leaders throughout the region will get on board with this program. NW Florida consistently ranks as one of the most desirable places in the world to visit. Together, we can also make it the most desirable place to relocate, work, and raise a family. And as the article below indicates, not every Coder in the U.S. can work in Silicon Valley. Let's bring them here!

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Why Doesn't Silicon Valley Hire Black Coders?

Howard University fights to join the tech boom.

By Vauhini Vara | January 21, 2016 Bloomberg BusinessWeek

In the fall of 2013 a young software engineer named Charles Pratt arrived on Howard University's campus in Washington. His employer, Google, had sent him there to cultivate future Silicon Valley programmers. It represented a warming of the Valley's attitude toward Howard, where more than 8 out of 10 students are black. The chair of the computer science department, Legand Burge, had spent almost a decade inviting tech companies to hire his graduates, but they'd mostly ignored him. Pratt began teaching computer science classes, helping to revamp the department's curriculum, and preparing students for Google's idiosyncratic application process. It was one of several initiatives meant to get the school to churn out large numbers of engineers. Two and a half years later, that hasn't happened. The slow progress reflects the knottiness of one of Silicon Valley's most persistent problems: It's too white.

Howard, founded in 1867, has long been one of the country's most eminent historically black colleges and universities. Thurgood Marshall went there, as did Toni Morrison; the writer Ta-Nehisi

Coates, who attended Howard, called it the Mecca—the place where he realized the black world “was more than a photo negative of that of the people who believe they’re white.” Still, it’s not among the elite science-oriented universities where tech companies have focused recruitment—places like Stanford, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon. Pratt arrived in Washington as traditional hiring practices were being scrutinized.

Pressured by employees and the press, companies began disclosing the demographics of their workforces. One figure stood out: African Americans, about 13 percent of the U.S. population, made up no more than 1 percent of technical employees at Google, Facebook, and other prominent Silicon Valley companies. This was at least partly because of the way companies recruited: From 2001 to 2009, more than 20 percent of all black computer science graduates attended an historically black school, according to federal statistics—yet the Valley wasn’t looking for candidates at these institutions.

As the companies revealed their data, Burge says, recruiters began to get in touch. Early in 2014, Google’s senior vice president for “people operations” blogged about Pratt’s stint at Howard. That fall, Facebook’s director of diversity, Maxine Williams, traveled to the school for a public chat with the university’s president and a meeting with students. Dropbox made its first recruiting trip that fall; a year later, Pinterest joined the list.

Despite the apparent progress, Burge was circumspect when I called in September 2015 to ask about the companies that had started approaching Howard: “‘Started’ could mean many things,” he said. Howard was showing up in tech companies’ news releases, but it wasn’t yet clear how Burge’s students would benefit. Facebook, Dropbox, and Pinterest hadn’t yet hired any graduating seniors for a full-time position. In 2015, Google hired just one. This year, out of the 28 seniors in his department, Burge knows of only two who’ve lined up a Silicon Valley job: one at Google—its second Howard hire—and another at Pandora. “There’s a big disconnect,” Burge said.

Burge teaches martial arts in his spare time, which is fitting. He has the dry, reserved demeanor of a techie but runs the computer science department like a devoted coach. “When there are companies coming to recruit, he’ll be like, ‘Go get in there! Go meet so-and-so!’” says Lena Alston, who graduated in December. Some of his students have nicknamed him Uncle Burge. In 2005, a year before he became department chair, Google invited him to interview for an engineering position. He wasn’t particularly interested in working there, but he saw a different opening: Maybe he’d meet some people who’d help his students. It paid off, eventually. Eight years later, the company created the Google in Residence program. Pratt had some teaching experience, from his college years at Carnegie Mellon, and he was disenchanted with his programming position at the time; plus, as a black engineer, he’d long been troubled by Silicon Valley’s lack of diversity. He packed his bags.

Silicon Valley is rife with Stanford and MIT graduates who started coding during childhood, won programming competitions in their spare time, and spent their summers interning at startups. At Howard, few of Pratt’s students fit that profile. They’d begun studying computer science in college, and many had never visited the Bay Area. One senior, Sarah Jones, says she’d assumed for years that Silicon Valley was the name of a city. When she finally visited during college, it struck her as a startlingly homogeneous culture, made up of white and Asian people who “like *Star Wars* and stuff like Pokémon.” When companies began to visit Howard, they’d boast about having on-site playground equipment and volleyball courts—not the kind of thing Jones or her friends got excited about. “Slides are not really appealing,” she says. “There are not a lot of people of color in the Valley—and that, by itself, makes it kind of unwelcoming.”

In 2013, when Pratt arrived, he got to know the students by staying on campus late into the evening, talking with them. When it came to Silicon Valley, “everyone had a war story,” he says. “They either had a personal story or a story someone had told them that had completely turned them off.” He was particularly taken with a sophomore named Victor Foreman, a smart, scrappy Texan who was compelled by big challenges but didn’t like following rules. Foreman had majored in computer science because its practitioners were constantly pushing the boundaries of human knowledge. “I wanted to be at the edge of some field,” he says.

Pratt had come to realize that his students’ previous courses had exposed them to computer science theory, but not to enough of the practical skills that matter to Silicon Valley. None had programmed before college. Foreman had started college in Texas, then dropped out and worked manual jobs. The labor had been painful, and there’d always been more workers than jobs, so after deciding to return to school, this time at Howard, he’d chosen computer science. Some other students impressed Pratt, too. Remington Holt had picked computer science after tagging along with a friend to an information session and liking Burge. Alston and Hallie Lomax had taken computer science classes on a whim and fallen in love with the subject.

“Those four were some of my favorite students—and, in my opinion, all of them superbrilliant,” Pratt says. He began assigning projects to them, and other freshmen and sophomores, that required *writing* code instead of just talking about it. “I was pretty lucky we got to have a Google professor, but he really let us know how behind we were,” Foreman says. Pratt also noticed that many advanced classes at Howard and other black colleges weren’t as rigorous or up-to-date as they were at Carnegie Mellon or Stanford. By senior year, students risked falling behind their peers from other institutions. “I’d ask faculty members, ‘Why are you teaching this course that way?’ ” he recalls. “And they’d say, ‘Well, I’ve been teaching the course for 25 years.’ ”

That year, Pratt urged Foreman, Alston, Lomax, and Holt to apply for paid summer internships at Google. He coached them through the process, particularly the company’s idiosyncratic interviews, which include tough programming challenges. Afterward, Lomax says, “I was sitting in a Starbucks, and someone called me and was like, ‘Let me talk to you about your offer.’ And I was like, ‘Is this a joke?’ ” Holt, who’d tried for a Google internship the previous year and failed, also received an offer, which he attributes to Pratt’s help. Alston got an internship. So did eight others.

Foreman did not. His classmates describe him as an excellent programmer—but unlike, say, Holt, a soft-spoken type known for getting along with everyone, Foreman is strong-willed, which sometimes gets him in trouble. “I just chalked it up to soft skills, I guess,” he says, explaining that he and his interviewer had clashed. Pratt says he’d been “furious” to learn that Foreman had been passed over. Other companies said no, too. Foreman got fed up. He wasn’t going to waste his time applying for internships in Silicon Valley if they were going to keep closing the door. Burge and Pratt recognized in Foreman’s experience a familiar predicament, in which people from underrepresented backgrounds worry about confirming negative stereotypes about their group, lose confidence, and get discouraged; the phenomenon, “stereotype threat,” is getting more attention in the Valley, and companies have begun training employees to be aware of it. “I spent a decent amount of time trying to encourage Victor, who was also one of my better students, to keep going,” Pratt says. “But it was obvious he felt a little rejected.”

When Lomax, Alston, and Holt arrived at Google, all three experienced varying degrees of culture shock. “When I was at Google, one thing that I heard over and over again was, ‘I learned to code when I was 7.’ And I was like, ‘OK, I didn’t,’ ” Lomax says. But the Valley’s offbeat culture

invigorated her. She'd always felt like a bit of an oddball at Howard; here, for the first time, the people she met reminded her of herself. Alston, who'd felt right at home at college, had a different experience. She could see Google wanted to foster a diverse culture, but, as the only African American on her team, she didn't feel she had much in common with her colleagues. "When I went out to lunch or something with my team, it was sort of like, 'Soooo, what are you guys talking about?'" she says. "It could be something as simple as, like, what they watch on TV or what kind of books they like to read. And those are just not TV shows that I watch or books that I read."

"Back in the civil rights period, it used to be that lighter-skinned people were able to pass and be more acceptable, so they were able to get into organizations or get into companies," Burge says. "Now it's a little bit different. It's about cultural fit. Do you laugh at the same jokes? Do you Rollerblade or whatever?" He says some of Howard's first interns at Google—before Pratt's arrival—did well during the summer but didn't get offers because, as a contact at the company told him, they hadn't been "Googley enough." (A spokeswoman said the company doesn't comment on hiring decisions. She noted that the head of people operations, Laszlo Bock, has written that Googleness involves being fun-loving, humble, and conscientious.)

Even the Google in Residence program, Pratt says, faced "lots of hurdles." Among them, Google didn't give engineers incentives to teach at Howard—taking the gig was liable to hurt an engineer, pulling him out of the evaluation and promotion cycle. Pratt encouraged others to step up, but the interest was muted.

"There are not a lot of people of color in the Valley—and that, by itself, makes it kind of unwelcoming"

That fall, when Facebook's Williams came to campus with colleagues, the visit didn't go over well. In a meeting with students, one Facebook employee brought up diversity so often that students say they felt uncomfortable—as if she wanted to talk only about the color of their skin and not programming. The event had been advertised as focused on diversity, but students had been eager to talk about jobs. A spokeswoman declined to make Williams or other recruiters available to be interviewed, because, she says, Facebook is "still building our relationship with Howard." Dropbox also made its recruiting trip to Howard that fall but didn't hire anyone full time.

Returning to campus for junior year, Foreman, Lomax, Alston, and Holt found that Burge's vision for his department was changing. He'd come to feel that Silicon Valley companies cared little about computer science theories. Recruiters wanted efficient, creative, experienced workers. So Burge developed new courses on creating apps and launching startups, while also assigning more coding projects and making his students more aware of hackathons and other extracurricular opportunities. It was "a cultural transformation of our department," he says.

Burge adapted his approach for each student. Foreman had to work outside school, at one point as a valet, and his grades suffered. Burge encouraged him to take on paid coding projects for companies instead of wasting his time with nonprogramming jobs. Lomax, Alston, and Holt, meanwhile, remained on a more traditional path. The summer after junior year, Lomax took a paid internship at a software startup called Opower, and Alston and Holt returned to Google. At the end of that summer, Alston and Holt underwent what's known as the conversion process—one or more interviews to help Google decide whether to bring an intern on full time. Alston got an offer. She didn't want to move to California—there was that cultural disconnect, and she'd have missed her family and friends back

East—and was relieved to learn that the job, as a programmer, was in New York. She accepted. Holt, though, was told to sit tight; Google hadn't made up its mind about him.

Lomax had become enthralled by Silicon Valley and started to think she'd learn more on the job than in college. This fall, she dropped a bombshell on Burge: She was leaving school and heading west, though she hoped to finish her degree at some point. In November, Lomax arrived in San Francisco. She'd applied for dozens of jobs in September and October and kept a spreadsheet tracking her progress. But after a couple of weeks in town, she still had no formal offers. Google, Twitter, Reddit, and others had rejected her; some companies hadn't even responded to her application or to referrals from friends. Some promising leads remained—she was still in the running with Facebook and LinkedIn—but all the interviewing, Lomax says, left her “kind of overwhelmed.”

She suspected that her dropping out of college concerned some interviewers. “The moment you say, ‘I'm not finishing this formal education,’ things start to carry a little bit more weight,” she says. “Like, if your algorithm isn't incredibly efficient in one of your interviews, they'll take that as a sign that you didn't get the full impact of that in school.” Dropping out of Harvard to launch a startup is one thing; leaving Howard to get a traditional position, it seems, is another. In mid-November, Lomax accepted an internship at Pinterest. The company had previously rejected her for a full-time job, but she felt she could convince them of her chops if she could spend a couple of months there.

Holt, too, was leaving school early—but still getting his degree. He'd earned enough credits to graduate in December. Boeing had offered him a position, but it didn't excite him. Microsoft had rejected him. Pinterest had flown him out to San Francisco for interviews but ultimately offered him the same deal it gave Lomax: an internship rather than a full-time gig. Holt says he was told that the company had been impressed with his personality and skills but felt that because he was graduating early, he might not be prepared for full-time employment. Holt heard from Google, too—again, a rejection. He'd done well during his second internship, he says he was told, but not in his conversion interview. “I have no idea what went wrong,” he texted me. A Google spokeswoman wouldn't comment on Holt's situation, but says interns most commonly don't get hired because of “technical ability.” For some time, Holt had been considering graduate school, and now he decided to focus on that, though before classes started, he would intern at Pinterest. Bre Cheung, a Pinterest recruiter, says the company gave Holt and Lomax internships partly because they're still pursuing degrees.

By then, Foreman was already working as a corporate consultant, but he came up with another scheme to get to Silicon Valley. Some time earlier, he'd told Burge about his idea for a music app called SoundCrowd. Burge encouraged him to launch it as part of a new startup development course he planned to co-teach in the fall with another engineering professor. He told Foreman that an investor named Michael Seibel was helping design and run the class. Seibel would also donate \$1,000 to each team of startup founders—to buy equipment, find customers, and so on. He was a partner at Y Combinator, a high-powered Valley firm that invests in and mentors promising startups. Foreman knew that joining Y Combinator could make an entrepreneur's career. Maybe, he thought, he could persuade Seibel to invest in SoundCrowd. It could happen, Burge told him.

People tend to discuss Silicon Valley's diversity problem in binary terms. One camp says companies are biased against underrepresented minorities, or at least aren't trying hard enough to attract them. The other says there aren't enough people from these backgrounds who are qualified for positions—or at least who are good enough to beat those Stanford grads with all the programming trophies and internship experience and Mozart-like childhoods. The reality is, both are true.

Many Silicon Valley companies now have executives—in many cases, entire teams—responsible for making their ranks more diverse; Google, Dropbox, Facebook, and Pinterest are among them. Several people working in these roles acknowledge that biases against people of color—often unconscious—have kept the Valley from being more diverse; in response, companies have instituted training on such subtle discrimination. Companies also described facing another challenge, though.

When they started interviewing seniors, companies found—as Pratt did at Howard—that many were underprepared. They hadn't been exposed to programming before college and had gaps in their college classes. The companies were coming into the process too late. So many of them have created programs geared toward freshmen and sophomores. “Early indications show promise,” says Roya Soleimani, a spokeswoman from Google, “but we know that meaningful change is going to take time.”

Makinde Adeagbo, an engineering programs manager at Pinterest, notes it'll be a couple of years before these interns graduate from college. Pinterest has visited the campus only once, but Cheung says the first year of recruiting at any campus is less about making job offers and more about making students aware of them as potential employers. When Justin Bethune, a diversity program manager at Dropbox, visited Howard, he met a lot of students who eventually took positions at well-known East Coast companies; for students raised in the South or East, moving to California is a big commitment. He realized it's important to “invest in and build trust and awareness among students” and “not just attend one job fair.” A Dropbox spokeswoman says the company plans to return to Howard next month. After Facebook's initial awkwardness at Howard, employees went back last fall and held more technical and recruiting-oriented events, which impressed students. The company recently offered a full-time position to a Howard student.

Pratt points out that Howard, best known as a liberal arts institution, still isn't producing many computer science students—fewer than 30 graduating seniors, compared with an average of more than 100 for U.S. universities with computer science departments that grant Ph.D.s (as Howard's does)—and says it'll take years for Burge's program to start training students at the level of Silicon Valley's top feeder schools. At the same time, he says, that companies haven't snapped up Lomax, Holt, and Foreman—all great candidates, in his mind—amounts to “an abject failure.” He wonders if companies were letting some of his former students slip through the cracks partly because of unconscious racial biases. “Someone like Hallie showing up in Silicon Valley expecting the reception that someone like Mark Zuckerberg would get—it doesn't surprise me that she wasn't met with open arms,” he says. “She doesn't fit the profile of what people think of when they think of engineers. Even though people think of Silicon Valley as a big meritocracy, I don't think that's how it works.”

“Even though people think of Silicon Valley as a big meritocracy, I don't think that's how it works”

Google has expanded its Google in Residence program to other black universities and more than doubled the number of summer interns it hires from them. Still, Pratt says, the program “is probably impacting Google's image more than it's impacting Google as a place.” Last year, he left the company to pursue an MBA at Stanford; he wants to become a venture capitalist and invest in diverse startup founders. His time at Howard made him passionate about making Silicon Valley less homogeneous, he says, but he lost faith that he could achieve that within Google.

In early November, I meet with Burge in a conference room in the engineering building. The walls are hung with posters displaying his students' research, and on a whiteboard someone has scribbled a

math problem. It's Veterans Day, a rare day off, and Burge shows up in an Adidas tracksuit. He talks about what he's doing to improve his students' job prospects. To address the lack of programming knowledge many had when they arrived at Howard, Burge has begun piloting a training program for incoming computer science freshmen. The students could complete the program online, over the summer, after which they'd be eligible for scholarships. And he's still revamping classes to be more project-based and less theoretical. The curriculum remains behind that of the top tech feeder schools, though, largely because the department simply has fewer resources. Burge is encouraging the university to let him hire more professors who could address the gaps. But whatever improvements he makes at Howard, he says, "the companies' cultures have to change, too."

Even some of Burge's closest partners have sometimes disappointed him. For the startup course, he had hoped Seibel, the investor, would visit campus at least twice. But as class was to begin, Seibel said he was getting married and would be tied up with a long bachelor party in Europe, then the wedding. Instead of visiting Howard, he offered to meet with students and attend the final presentation of their startups over Skype. "He's a busy man," Burge says. He's careful not to criticize Seibel, but his tone sounds vexed. It reminds me of something Burge had once told me in a moment of frustration about Silicon Valley companies: "They want to do these things, but nobody is making the solid commitments."

In late November, Burge's startup class is winding down, and Foreman and his co-founders have had their first virtual session with Seibel. Foreman still hopes Seibel will bring him into Y Combinator. "I don't think he'd take time out unless he was trying to find a company," he says. Seibel has offered a hint of encouragement: "He said if we build this and people use it, he'd be the first customer."

Soon after, I speak with Seibel. He has big ambitions for the class, which he hopes to expand to other campuses, and envisions a future in which historically black colleges are full of kids who know how to start companies. "I think there are two challenges—and one challenge is how to diversify the workforce in the technology industry, and the other challenge is how to diversify the people who are starting companies," says Seibel, who is black. "At Y Combinator, we're focusing on the second one more than the first." This seems to bode well for Foreman, and I ask Seibel what he remembers of his conversation with the SoundCrowd team. "To me, they sounded exactly like smart, technical college kids," he says. "I was confident they had the ability to build whatever they wanted to build." But he stresses that the goal of the class isn't for him to find investments. Startup founders—including these—should focus on their customers, not on funding, he says. Seibel says he wasn't too involved in the class only partly because he was busy. He also wants professors to take ownership of the course.

The following day, Seibel attends the final presentations via Skype. He peppers the groups with questions: How many customers do they have? How much do they think they could charge for their product? At the end of the class, Burge asks Seibel if he has any final words. He congratulates the students on their projects, which he says have impressed him. "I know it took a lot of hard work," he says. Then he hangs up, leaving Burge and his students to figure out their next move.