A Conversation with General Assembly's Priya Ramanathan
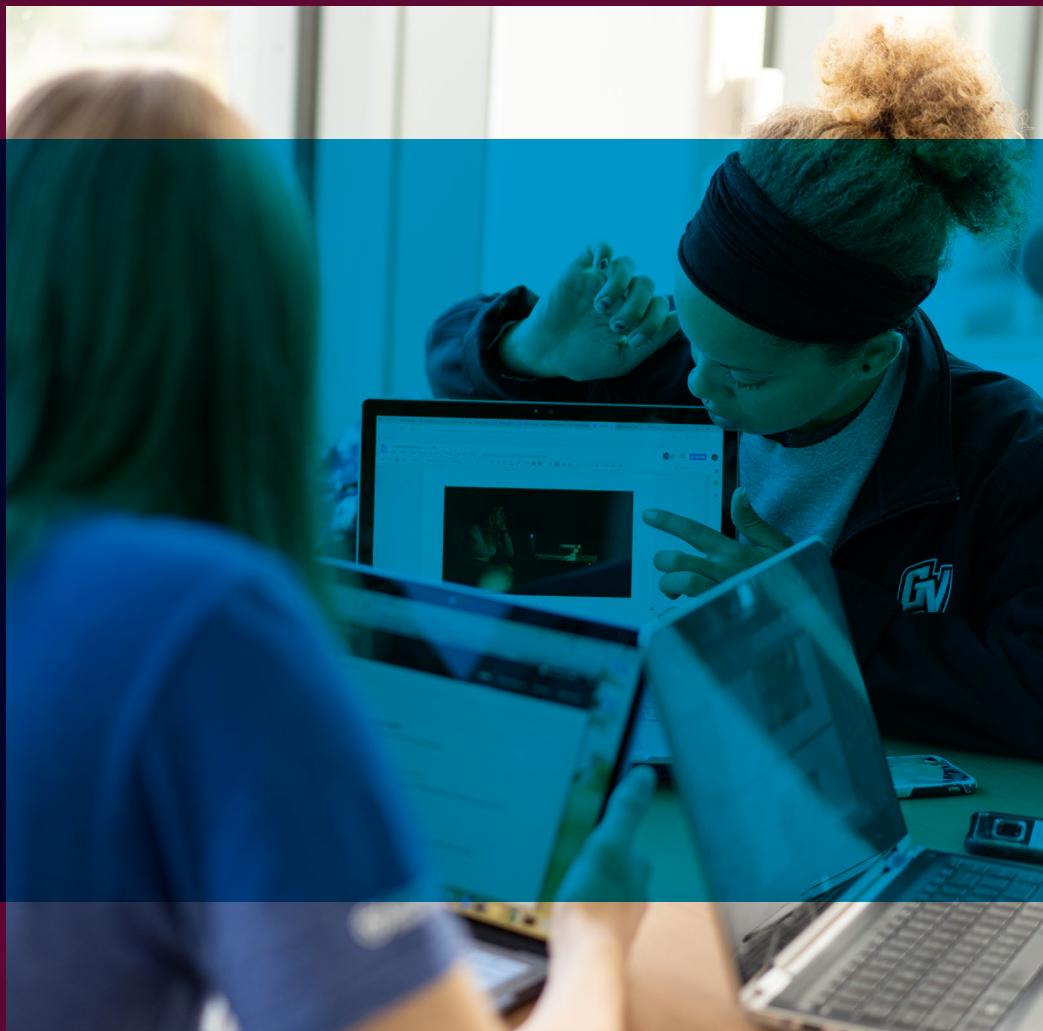
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Introduction

General Assembly (GA) provides in-demand skills through programs that are developed by industry experts and tailored to meet the needs of employers worldwide. GA offers a variety of training options, including short-form courses, part-time bootcamps, and full-time bootcamps. GA also offers immersive courses in which learners receive dedicated career support in addition to learning from and collaborating with experts, mentors, and leaders. Other supports include job-search preparation, networking opportunities, and coaching for students and graduates.

This interview with Priya Ramanathan, vice president of government and workforce partnerships at General Assembly, was edited for length and clarity.

What is GA and the scale of its work?

We focus on connecting the enterprise need for technology talent with learners looking to upskill or reskill into technology careers. Our expertise is . . . [in] software engineering, UX design, data, and product. Since our founding in 2011, we're at about 100,000 alumni. . . . [and] we work with hundreds of companies, including about 45 Fortune 100 companies.

How do you think about integrating learning and work experience?

Many of our graduates . . . [find] full-time roles with companies . . . [or] apprenticeship programs. Our digital skills training has historically been in the space of pre-apprenticeship training or RTI—related training instruction. But in the past six or seven years, we have had employers come to us and say, "We're trying to figure out a way to build more pathways . . . . [or] an apprenticeship program. What we are missing is someone to train these individuals . . . so that we can onboard them within our companies . . . ." We work with folks like Adobe and ServiceNow . . . to think about how we build some of those models.

Are there any target populations?

The intended catchall is individuals who don't have a background in this work [but] who are looking for a pathway to move into technology. . . . This emphasis has been mostly on the entry-level side—not as much for mid-level positions. One layer we're adding is to provide accelerators or upskilling training so that folks are learning additional skills as they move through the on-the-job learning experience. We're uniquely poised to offer such opportunities because we already have these modularized upskilling programs.

What has worked really well on the employer side?

Success comes when employers have a clear point of view around who is owning the apprenticeship at the organization . . . . Having those types of champions allows us to report on progress and make changes over time.

What are the challenges when working with employers?

It can be challenging if the employer doesn't know what they want. . . . It's rare that employers are coming to us and saying, "We want to tap into registered apprenticeships." What they're telling us is they're interested in apprenticeships in general. So, when talking to employers, we ask, "What is that contingent hiring need that you have?" or "What is the intent of wanting to build a program like this?" . . . In some cases, someone may need only three to five apprentices. But sometimes we can work across a couple different companies and say, "Hey, they're all looking for this job title. Let's train a group of 20, and they'll be split up across companies." That way it's a bit more of a talent distribution model.

What does partnership and engagement look like with colleges and universities?

Speaking bluntly, universities often sense that we are competition, so we often explain that we don't want to be in competition—especially because we don't provide any college credit. Some of our graduates . . . leverage what they've learned at GA through coarticulation—transferring what they've learned through our immersive courses into college credits.

As GA expands into apprenticeships, do you expect to serve more people without degrees?

We have a lot of good examples of learners who it's just not on their career path to get a degree. . . . [but] need the skills to be able to move into the careers they're looking for. Apprenticeships are certainly a good option for that. However, we do work with a lot of employers who specifically are saying, "Hey . . . . we're trying out hiring grads without four-year degrees, and do you have talent that might be able to fit that need?"

In this evolving ecosystem, how do companies need to change?

Companies . . . need to think more creatively about where they're hiring from. We have a strong talent placements team at GA that specifically works with companies looking to onboard, to hire net new talent. . . . [and then] we ask, "What's next? Can we upskill existing employees?" If that's the case, if you're forecasting upcoming need and you've already seen the quality of our training, can we custom-build something for you—something that will allow you to recruit talent for an upcoming hiring need? . . . [Further,] a lot of our upskilling courses are being brought on by companies as a way of making sure that they're investing in their talent.

Where is higher education falling short in this ecosystem?

What our students—our learners—are looking for is, "Can you get me a job, and how quickly can you get me the job? What will I be making on that first day? Are these skills actually going to prepare me for that opportunity?"

How can we best meet the needs of economies and learners?

There needs to be somebody credibly speaking to a learner about what is the best option for them to meet their goals. Sometimes, learners follow whoever gives them the best sales pitch. But pursuing a degree or skills training is a risky investment if you don't actually know it's going to result in a solid position.

GA Program Overview

GA has been a pioneer in education and career transformation and the leading source for training, staffing, and career transitions. GA fosters a flourishing community of professionals who are pursuing their career passions. Programs are developed by industry experts and tailored to meet the demanding needs of top employers worldwide. GA's immersive courses position candidates for professional success, and thousands of companies have hired GA graduates.