Alternative tech education tracks continue to grow in San Antonio

Kristen Mosbrucker

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A new San Antonio-based internet school startup, Laserbird Academy, is looking to attract students before they hit the university system where student debt is much higher.

The website design school was built by Jonathan Earley, CEO at Tealix Design. He founded Laserbird Academy in 2015 and modeled it after his online courses for Ivy Tech Community College, where he's been teaching since 2009.

DESIGN EDUCATION WITH A CAUSE

WHAT IF YOU COULD PROVIDE PREMIUM EDUCATION WHILE RAISING AWARENESS OF SOCIAL ISSUES?

Laserbird Academy teaches students practical web design, marketing, and entrepreneurial skills in order to give them a head start in the marketing and design industry. Students then have the opportunity to put their new skills towards social issues they are passionate about by creating web sites and marketing materials. We call this our "Passion Project".

Laserbird Academy is a new online school for website design based in San Antonio.

Screen shot from Laserbird Academy's website

The curriculum is a hybrid of recorded videos and live chat sessions, akin to a massive open online course. The school charges a subscription. The goal is to expose students to elements of design and basic html computer coding. The vocational school is not accredited, though it is considering that path. Right now, it's in a pilot with an inaugural class of about a dozen.

"I wanted to provide a guide to students who are interested in being web designers or entrepreneurs so they could save themselves years of spinning their wheels," Earley told the Business Journal.

On average, these alternative mostly for-profit educational schools add several hundred new graduates in the San Antonio market each year. Some are accredited by the state, while others are not.

Codeup LLC and San Antonio

Coding Academy are other area vocational tech schools. Tech Talent South is also active in San Antonio. Another is Hallmark University, a nonprofit alternative college that has an accelerated bachelor's degree track for information systems and cybersecurity.

Since opening last year, San Antonio Coding Academy has seen about eight students complete the entire certificate track, and five of those students are employed, according to the company. Codeup LLC reported to the Texas

Workforce Commission that it had 74 students from September 2014 to August 2015 with an employment rate of 83 percent.

Accenture Federal Services, a subsidiary of Accenture LLP and a sizable local technology industry employer with San Antonio operations, stood up a 12-week apprenticeship program in April 2016 that extends to all students at least 17 years old for about 50 slots that pays about $14 an hour. The company aims to draw students and adults on the East Side of San Antonio who may be attending Sam Houston High School and St. Philips College.

St. Philips College had 10 graduates receive an associates' degree in information assurance and cybersecurity in 2016. A much larger graduating class left the school with an aircraft technician airframe associates degree — about 47 students that same year.

San Antonio College awarded 18 associate degrees to computer programmers

and 15 associate degrees to information assurance and cybersecurity graduates in 2017— up from 18 and four, respectively.

Rackspace Hosting Inc. opened its own vocational bootcamp called Open Cloud Academy. It's had hundreds of graduates that have industry certificates in technology, especially in cloud computing. In 2016, Open Cloud Academy started a new cohort for a cybersecurity certificate track.

Some argue though that vocational schools may get the workforce into tech jobs that might be automated in the coming years. But there's still a window of opportunity.

"I think we have at least four more cycles of preparing our generation for the next workforce in technology before automation," said Julie Huls, founder of the HulsGroup.

Kristen Mosbrucker covers technology, finance and the military.