

Education

Businesses and universities team up on a new digital technology credential

By [Nick Anderson](#)

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Mike Fasil had much to celebrate when he graduated Friday alongside thousands of others from George Mason University.

The son of Ethiopian immigrants and the first in his family to go to college, the 21-year-old from Northern Virginia received a bachelor's degree in information systems and operations management. He minored in an increasingly popular subject, data analysis, and lined up a job as a business technology analyst.

What also sets his résumé apart is a digital technology credential he earned from George Mason that educators say will soon be offered in several universities in the District and Virginia.

This new marker of achievement reflects growing demand from employers for graduates with fluency in core tech subjects, no matter what their major. It also shows the business community's deep ties to higher education — a relationship educators and executives insist will not compromise academic quality or independence.

Designed with unusually detailed guidance from major businesses in the Washington region, the digital tech credential aims to certify that graduates have knowledge and skills in fields such as statistics, data visualization and cybersecurity.

"It's definitely something I'll be able to have on my belt," Fasil said. "I have much more exposure in fields I would not have even touched. That is very helpful for me."

The credential program debuted this year at George Mason and Virginia Commonwealth universities. American University, the University of Richmond and Virginia Tech plan to launch comparable programs in the fall, and more schools may follow.

The credential is outside of higher-education tradition: It is neither a major, nor a minor, nor a formal certificate. It is, rather, a recognition that students have taken a short sequence of courses (five at GMU) that cover knowledge and skills in high demand.

The courses will vary from school to school.

To help universities select them, business leaders drew up a list of 41 skills they look for in a job candidate with general fluency in digital technology. For example, they want graduates who can:

- Demonstrate how data can be used to reduce uncertainty and risk in decision-making.
- Show knowledge of probability and standard statistical distributions.
- Use a computer application to manage large amounts of information.
- Visualize data using displays including tables, dashboards, graphs, maps and trees.
- Identify data situations vulnerable to insider threats.

The wish list underscores the huge appetite for digital-savvy workers.

“I have been struck by how universal the need is,” said Paul Feeko, a partner at EY. He noted his professional-services firm (known to many as Ernst & Young) worked on the project with a variety of businesses, from defense contractor Northrop Grumman to financial company Capital One.

“How different are we?” he said. “And yet when we talked about our needs, they were so similar, and similarly pervasive.”

Interest in digital technology has exploded in recent years on college campuses. Data science has become one of the hottest subjects for undergraduate and master’s students. Students are also flocking to computer science, computer engineering and majors related to analytics, cybersecurity, information systems and many other tech fields. Employers are hiring those kinds of graduates at a rapid pace in a prosperous economy.

But business leaders are thinking beyond bachelor’s degrees. They want all kinds of graduates to have digital skills. And many want a standardized credential to represent those skills.

“Employers are saying, ‘We’re not going to leave it vague,’ ” said Chauncy Lennon, vice president for the future of learning and work at the Lumina Foundation, based in Indiana, which promotes expansion of learning opportunities beyond high school. “We want this specific credential that’s clearly definite.”

The idea for the digital technology credential grew out of a nonprofit business-university collaboration announced last year, with backing from the Greater Washington Partnership, a civic group. Among the 13 educational institutions involved are the public flagship Universities of Virginia and Maryland, and the private Georgetown, George Washington, Johns Hopkins and Howard universities.

On the business side are 14 companies, including an Amazon subsidiary called Amazon Web Services. (Amazon founder and chief executive Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

From Richmond to Baltimore, businesses and universities share the goal of developing a tech-savvy workforce to expand the region’s economy. Top business executives started to meet last year with university presidents and provosts. Northrop Grumman hosted a key early meeting in April 2018 at its headquarters in Fairfax County.

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“Most of them had never sat down with each other,” Peter L. Scher, chairman of the Mid-Atlantic region for JPMorgan Chase & Co., said. “We saw a lot of commonality.”

Businesses crave more graduates with problem-solving skills who can navigate the technical and ethical challenges of the digital economy. Universities want to make sure they are helping to meet the job needs of the region.

But getting them all to work together — within and across sectors — is a somewhat novel idea.

“Our instinct as universities is to seek differentiation — to compete with one another,” George Mason President Ángel Cabrera said. “It’s clear that in many, many areas, we would be better off by collaborating.”

Cabrera and other university leaders insist they are not ceding control of the academic enterprise to big business. They said they are merely learning more about what employers need so they can offer relevant programs to students.

“We’re not ashamed of our goal to help students be successful professionally,” Cabrera said.

GMU wants “well-rounded scholars,” he said, with a liberal-arts background and high career potential. “If you believe that, then working with the private sector to know exactly what is needed is the smartest thing you can do.”

Brian K. Fitzgerald, chief executive of the Business-Higher Education Forum, a workforce-development group based in Washington, said companies are not “dictating the curriculum.” Instead, they are sending “a very strong signal” about the workforce they need.

“What we’re really talking about is what’s the definition of a literate person in the 21st century,” Fitzgerald said. “There is definitely a digital component to that.”

At GMU, the digital technology credential is just getting off the ground. Fasil is one of four graduates this spring who completed it. The university said students who join the program will receive opportunities for job shadowing and mentoring, priority for internships and “guaranteed résumé review for open positions” with participating businesses. The credential does not show up yet on transcripts, the university said, but it will be visible as a “badge” through an online site that verifies documents related to education attainment.

Hannah Licea, another graduate who earned the credential, majored in psychology at GMU. The 21-year-old from Houston is pondering a career as a business consultant. When she heard about the digital technology credential, she signed up for a cybersecurity course to satisfy a requirement. It became one of her favorite classes.

Licea said she is more interested in using her skills than in talking up “every little credential or certificate I receive.” Learning about digital technology will pay off in the long run, she said. “This is something I can use at any point in my career, not just for my first job after graduation.”

Nick Anderson

Nick Anderson covers higher education and other education topics for The Washington Post. He has been a writer and editor at The Post since 2005. Follow 
