

# Flexible workforce learning

HACC embraces stackable credentials and virtual learning to enhance noncredit student pathways

HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, worked with D2L to create pathways for learning progression for students enrolled in the College's workforce development noncredit programs. In collaboration with local businesses, HACC is building stackable credentials that can be delivered online via D2L's Brightspace platform, providing a blend of self-paced and instructor-led programs that help students develop and demonstrate new competencies.



## At a glance

**Client:** HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College

**Students:\***

- 17,400 enrolled in certificate, diploma and two-year associate degree programs
- 8,300 remedial and workforce development students

**Industry:** Postsecondary education

**Website:** [hacc.edu](http://hacc.edu)

## Platform/Features:

- D2L's Brightspace platform
- Competency-based education and awards tool
- Pulse mobile app
- Annotations

## Interviewee:

- Doreen Fisher-Bammer, Associate Provost of Virtual Learning

## Highlights:

- Doubled demand for workforce development programs, enabling HACC to meet and exceed its annual targets for enrollment
- Launched a range of new stackable credentials for workforce development, a key strategic goal
- Adopted competency-based education capabilities, enabling students to earn certificates to prove that they have acquired new skills
- Maintained momentum for students and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic with powerful online and mobile learning solutions

\*Fall 2019 data



*“Brightspace enables us to provide engaging competency-based training and generate certificates for students to document credentials earned for their newly acquired skills.”*

*Doreen Fisher-Bammer, Associate Provost of Virtual Learning, HACC*

## Challenge

### **Creating an accessible model for collaborative workforce learning**

HACC, the largest and oldest of Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges, offers a broad spectrum of education pathways to residents in its 11-county service region. Many of HACC’s 17,400 students are working toward a two-year career or transfer associate degree in one of the College’s 100 programs. HACC also has over 8,300 students enrolled in the College’s certificate and diploma workforce development programs that equip students with the skills needed by local communities and businesses.

Doreen Fisher-Bammer, HACC’s associate provost of virtual learning, said, “The key question is, how do we get our students into the workforce as soon as possible? And then, how do we continue to provide learning opportunities that help them grow and continue to move up within their intended organizations?”

HACC’s strategy is built on extensive collaboration with the business community. The College’s workforce development team engages with employers to understand their training needs, and the instructional design team works with course experts to develop programs to meet those needs.

“Many of our content experts work full time in industry, so their time is precious. Our goal is to focus their expertise on building courses to provide a quality learning experience for many individuals in our community. If students can do most of their learning in their own time and at their own pace, it’s more flexible for them and employers.”

*Doreen Fisher-Bammer, Associate Provost of Virtual Learning, HACC*

A second challenge is accessibility, especially in the wake of the pandemic. In mid-March 2020, HACC moved the majority of its courses and services to remote and online delivery. However, many workforce development programs include components that require hands-on experience. Students who are learning to weld, drive a forklift, or operate precision machinery still need to spend time in the lab or on the shop floor.



## Solution

Access to technology is another challenge. Although the College provides free on-campus Wi-Fi access and laptops to students who need them, many still do not have a computer or reliable internet connection at home.

“For online learning to work, we need to make sure our mobile app is as robust as possible. For many of our students, that’s the only way they have to complete their classes,” said Fisher-Bammer.

“Given all these constraints, the questions are, how much can we deliver? How much of our education and training can we provide with a flexible but low-cost technology approach? How much can we put online? And how can we take advantage of new technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality (VR/AR) while keeping the barriers to entry as low as possible?”

**Delivering competency-based education online**  
HACC has been working with D2L to make many of its workforce development courses available online and on mobile devices.

Based on feedback from the local business community, the College identifies the skills and competencies that are in greatest demand. Its design team works with content experts from the relevant industries to create new courses built around interactive, self-paced modules that are delivered through D2L’s Brightspace learning management system.

Increasingly, the College is using Brightspace to develop a stackable credentials strategy that can be defined as a more bite-size piece of education that stands on its own and has value in the workplace. The College is creating modular “microcredentials” that students can use to demonstrate their progress in new skills and competencies, whether or not they are working toward a higher qualification such as a degree.

Fisher-Bammer said, “The question was, how do we assess learning in a quality manner now that we’re not face-to-face with students? The answer we came up with was a competency-based education (CBE) approach. Brightspace enables us to provide engaging competency-based training and generate certificates for students to document credentials earned for their newly acquired skills.”



*“...our programs lead directly into high-priority occupations that we create as the need for this training is presented by business and industry.”*

*Vic Rodgers, Associate Provost for Workforce Development and Continuing Education, HACC*

Another advantage of CBE is that it enables students to complete workforce development programs at their own pace, learning specific competencies as needed instead of following a rigid course structure.

HACC has also integrated the Brightspace platform with solutions from Course Merchant and Ellucian to provide seamless user journeys for students and teachers. For example, the Course Merchant integration provides an online shopping cart experience for users of HACC’s **online workforce development portal**. Students can simply click on the class they want to take and are automatically added to the Brightspace platform and given access to their course.

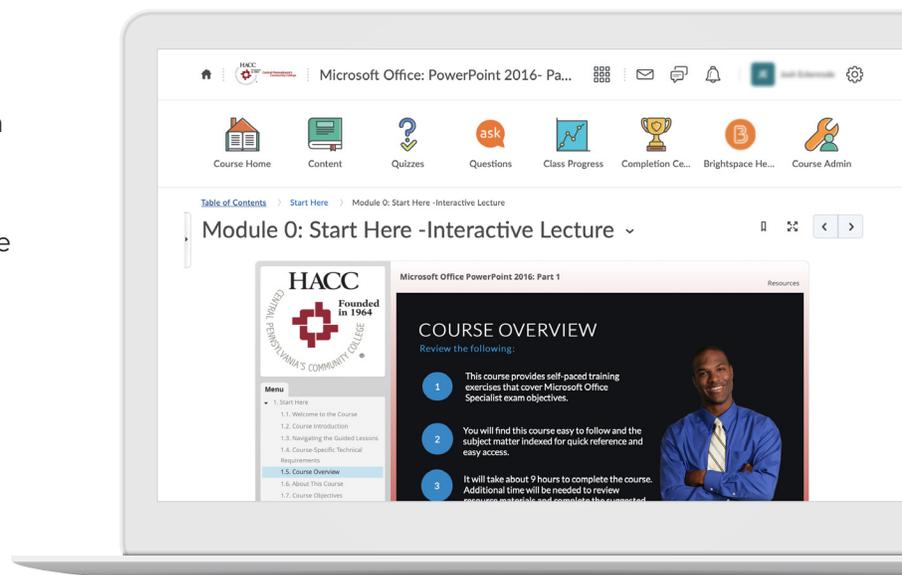
“This solution allowed the Workforce Development and Continuing Education Division to easily enroll students without the need to come to a campus,” said HACC instructional designer Josh Eckenrode.

These virtual learning capabilities came to the forefront when the pandemic hit. HACC faculty with experience teaching classes virtually took the lead in helping their peers convert course materials and teaching methods from face-to-face to a fully online or remote model.

“Our team provided coaching sessions all day, over the weekends, and in the evenings on different topics like pedagogy and assessment. It was a real trial by fire, but the Brightspace platform has made it possible to keep a lot of our courses going while our campuses remain closed,” said Fisher-Bammer.

For courses that still involve a hands-on, practical component, HACC is investigating technology options. For example, the College recently rolled out VR/AR capabilities as part of its precision machining course and plans to increase its use of VR/AR to support other STEAM-focused initiatives.

“The creation of these simulated experiences can open the door for potential new students and could play a role in virtual open house tours of a sample workforce development classroom experience,” said Eckenrode.





# Result

## **Harnessing technology to achieve strategic goals**

HACC's adoption of virtual learning technology is a key strategic objective. For example, to attract and enroll new students, the College is implementing guided pathways for learning progression. The development of stackable credentials to enable workforce development courses to count as credits toward a degree is a major step.

“The goal was to develop and promote eight new options for workforce development-to-credit stackable credentials by the end of June 2020. And we actually have more than eight already in place, so we're ahead of target. Demand for our workforce development programs has doubled, and even though our enrollment target for this year was significantly higher than last year, we've already hit it,” said Fisher-Bammer.

“In HACC's Workforce Development and Continuing Education Division, we don't track employment after training because our programs lead directly into high-priority occupations that we create as the need for this training is presented by business and industry,” said Vic Rodgers, HACC associate provost for workforce development and continuing education.

“Another way we provide training is to contract with our business partners to help them upskill their existing workforce. We take a great deal of pride in serving our business and industry communities with flexibility and our ability to be nimble and responsive, and we often customize our training to meet their needs. The growth of our virtual programming is exciting because it adds an additional pathway to better meet their needs,” Rodgers said.

On the accessibility front, D2L's Pulse mobile app provides first-class access to course materials and learning tools, ensuring that students can study and complete their assignments remotely, even if they don't have access to a computer at home.

The Brightspace platform is also used by HACC to develop new programs that respond directly to needs created by the pandemic. For example, [HACC's Contact Tracer Training Program](#) was launched in June 2020 in both the United States and India.

“What we appreciate and value about D2L is how their technology and their support help us make the student and faculty experience seamless. With the Brightspace platform, we're able to support every student throughout their journey at HACC,” said Fisher-Bammer.