WGU ACADEMY:

Preparing College Students for Academic and Career Success with Social-Emotional Learning
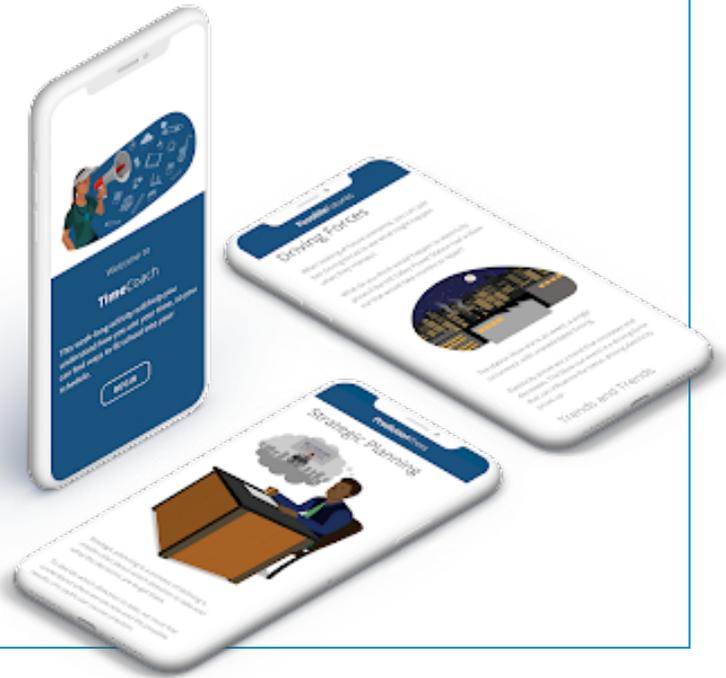
PACA

wgu labs

WGU Academy: Preparing College Students for Academic and Career Success with Social-Emotional Learning

Western Governors University (WGU) created WGU Academy (Academy)—a college readiness program to expand access and opportunity to higher education at WGU and beyond. Academy partnered with WGU Labs to design its catalyst for student success, the Program for Academic and Career Advancement (PACA). Utilizing social-emotional learning and student-centered program design, PACA prepares students to thrive in their academics and careers.

How do we ensure first-time college students succeed?

WGU designed an online, competency-based model, expanding access to higher education to more students. But in 2018, they still found themselves asking: How do we more effectively serve students who apply to the university with no prior college experience? WGU needed a better way to onboard and retain students who did not meet the minimum admission requirements.
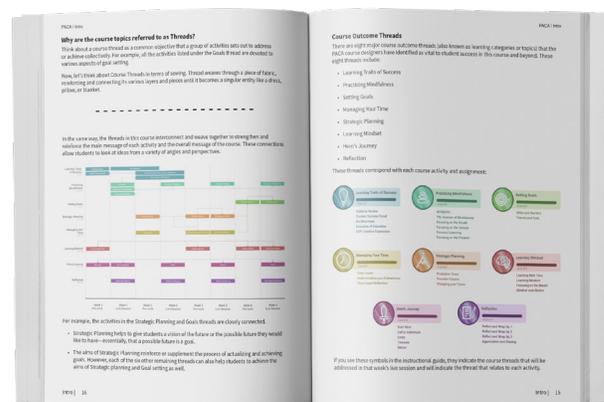
Understanding Prospective Students' Needs

Prior to Academy, WGU connected prospective students with third-party resources to get the coursework they needed for admission. But after being sent to these resources, many students did not return or reapply to WGU, stating that they

- felt disconnected from WGU
- needed more guidance, confidence, and support from WGU as they worked through theses courses
- wanted to start on their WGU journey and receive direction for their degree programs sooner

WGU Academy: A New College Readiness Initiative

To address these challenges, WGU created Academy, a college readiness program focused on preparing students for success in higher education and their careers. Academy had established a partnership with a third-party provider to address students' academic needs.
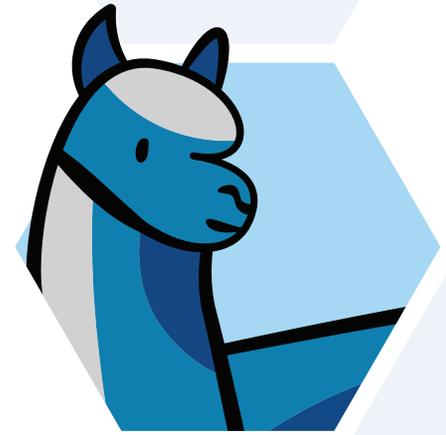
But they still needed a team to help them design high-quality content to support student success over a degree program that could take years to complete.

Coach's Live Session Guide

Improving Outcomes through Social-Emotional Learning

WGU Academy partnered with WGU Labs Learning Experience Designers and content creators to design, build, and launch PACA.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Utilizing social-emotional learning techniques, this coach-guided program blends live online cohort sessions and independent learning. This approach allows Academy to address students' needs for greater support, direction, and belonging at WGU, and offer students tools to develop the confidence and resilience needed for academic and career success.

STUDENT-CENTERED PROGRAM DESIGN

To improve outcomes, Academy wanted to understand the students their program would serve. Labs designers engaged with students and the onboarding process to gain firsthand understanding of students' challenges and experiences. This research allowed Academy and Labs to empathize with students and pinpoint design opportunities to create a more equitable learning experience, targeting students' specific needs.

Labs designers and content creators then built and tested the content with students and Academy leadership. They used this feedback to refine and iterate until it met Academy's vision for student engagement and success.
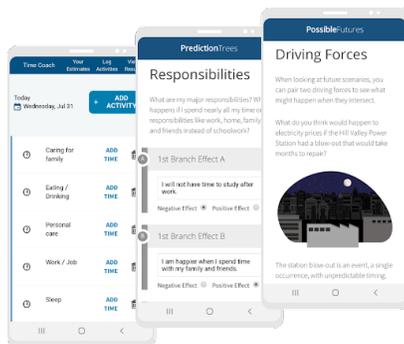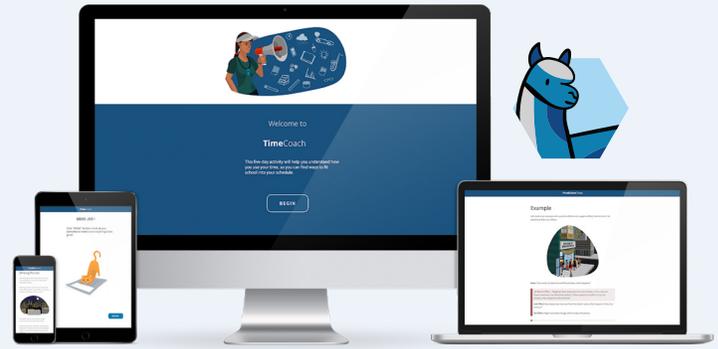
CONTINUOUS PROGRAM EVALUATION

After launching PACA, Academy needed a way to evaluate the program to determine if it met both WGU and students' needs. Academy collaborated with Labs designers to create continuous forms of feedback: learner engagement models based on student interaction data, as well as student surveys. To supplement this feedback, designers also interviewed students and coaches and gained firsthand experience engaging with each course component. This research allowed Academy to identify areas of improvement for future versions of the program.

PACA

PACA'S TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

Throughout PACA there are carefully crafted learning experiences that

- challenge students' perceptions of reality
- strengthen their self-awareness, and
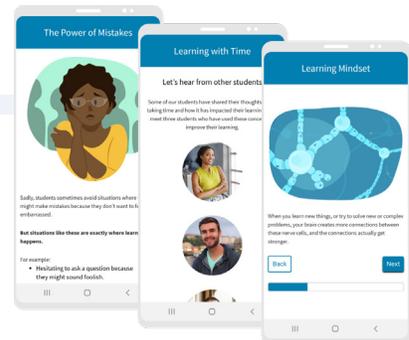- inspire them to take action and make necessary life changes for academic and career success.

TIME COACH

Students estimate how much time they spend on daily activities, track their time for a week using an app, and see differences between their predicted and actual time spent. This activity highlights specific areas to work on and inspires students to make needed changes to reach their personal goals.

LEARNING MINDSET

In this interactive module, students gain insights into the ways the human brain learns. This activity dispels common myths about intelligence, strengthens confidence, and offers reflective prompts, helping students consider changes to their study habits and self-perceptions.

LIVE SESSIONS

Coach-guided sessions engage students in reflection on weekly pre-work (homework) activities in real-time with other students. These sessions encourage students to share insights into experiences and challenges they've faced on their student journeys, providing a sense of community, belonging, and support to encourage greater resilience.

Advancing Student Success

Through collaboration, Academy and Labs designed a program that offers students a foundation for success at WGU and beyond. Within its first year, Academy's impact on student retention and on-time progress to graduation (OTP) illustrates PACA's effectiveness in providing students with the necessary tools and support for the first year of college (read full report for more information).

8,954
students served
in 2020

1,583
graduates
in 2020

2,413
graduates as of
August 2021

+8.7%
Academy graduates achieved Term 1 OTP at a rate 8.7 percentage points higher than non-Academy students

+11.4%
Academy graduates achieved Term 2 OTP at a rate 11.4 percentage points higher than non-Academy students.

+13.9%
First-generation Academy graduates achieved Term 1 OTP at a rate 13.9 percentage points higher than first-generation non-Academy students.

The Academy graduate sample size is 869 and the sample size for the non-Academy group is 36,141 students. All findings are statistically significant.

What's next?

Now in its second year, Academy continues to improve upon PACA, refining the program to not only fit the needs of new WGU students, but also learners in the workplace, community colleges, and high schools. Since its launch, Academy has partnered with various institutions and organizations such as Dahlia's Hope, Western New Mexico University, the DeBruce Foundation, and tnAchieves. Today, Academy continues to provide students with a solid foundation to persist in higher education at WGU and beyond.

Testimonials

"In working with the Labs Design team, we gained deep levels of empathy for our student's learning experience and customized the content accordingly. This work has served as the foundation for the early success we see at Academy, particularly for our first-generation college students."
—Chelsea Barnett,
Director of Learning Experience,
WGU Academy

"I honestly believe you've hit the nail on the head with these activities. They are great ways to reflect & learn. I can't wait to learn more from my PACA group as well."
—PACA Student

"PACA is helping me get where I want to go. This class shows me that I am not alone."
—PACA Student

"I would just be going into this new adventure without guidance if I didn't have PACA. The course helps me stay motivated and on track."
—PACA Student

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