Academy Canada: Helping Students with Disabilities to Enter the Workforce

Academy Canada empowers people with disabilities to achieve career success, using digital education resources that support high-quality learning experiences.

Through 15 locations across Newfoundland and Labrador, Academy Canada aims to deliver tailored training that prepares learners for opportunities in the workforce. To enhance outcomes for students with special learning needs, the organization has embraced D2L’s Brightspace platform to create flexible learning solutions.
SUMMARY
To enable the best learning outcomes for students with special learning needs, Academy Canada aims to equip its instructors with all the support and resources they need to deliver effective teaching. With D2L's Brightspace platform, the career college is developing tailored digital programs that make its curriculum accessible for every student.

QUICK FACTS
• Empowers students with special learning needs to find great employment and live independent lives.
• Increased course offerings from 32 to 200, as the Brightspace platform helps make it faster and easier to develop accessible course content.
• Online student enrollments increased from 40 in 2015 to over 1000 in less than 5 years, since adopting the Brightspace platform.
• Increased student satisfaction: 98% of students would recommend Academy Canada to a friend.

TARGETING OUTSTANDING LEARNING OUTCOMES
Since it was founded in 1985, Academy Canada has grown to become Eastern Canada's largest independent career college, combining solid academic experiences with practical, hands-on training.

A diverse and inclusive organization, Academy Canada is committed to helping students with unique learning and physical disability challenges to thrive. The aim is to ensure that every student can overcome accessibility challenges and graduate with the skills and experience to compete to their full potential in the workforce.

Lisa Lovelady, Curriculum Manager at Academy Canada, says: “In my role, success means making it as straightforward as possible for our instructors to perform at their best and deliver great teaching to our students. In practice, this often means finding innovative ways to ensure that the information and learning resources they need are always quick and easy to access.”
To help break down barriers to achievement for students with learning and physical disabilities, Academy Canada often needs to adapt its curriculum based on each individual’s unique needs.

“Some of our students with special learning needs have had the experience of trying education in the past and having it not quite work out,” continues Lisa Lovelady. “Our goal is to work with those students and learn from those experiences, identify what worked and what didn’t, and find accommodations in our curriculum to meet their specific learning requirements.”

ADAPTING TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENT LEARNING NEEDS

Academy Canada aims to go the extra mile to empower every student with special learning needs to achieve his or her full potential.

“I’ll never forget the day that I first met Jeremy Cross, who was at that time a prospective student for our Therapeutic Recreation program. Jeremy’s quadriplegic cerebral palsy affected his ability to move and to speak, and to give Jeremy a chance to have a successful post-secondary experience, we knew that we would need to find ways to make the program accessible.”

Lisa Lovelady, Curriculum Manager, Academy Canada

“Jeremy’s situation brought many challenges, but he also brought with him an incredible determination and strength of character. Even though Jeremy couldn’t communicate in ways we’d usually communicate, we knew that he wasn’t going to accept a simple “no.” It was crucial for us to find a robust way to assess and verify his progress and define accommodations that would enable him to complete the program.”

Joanne Bennett, Jeremy’s Program Instructor

Joanne Bennett, Jeremy’s Program Instructor, comments: “He shone a light on the potential for individuals with special learning needs. Through a supportive team effort, his journey was successful.”

At the time when Jeremy was studying, he didn’t have access to the technologies that Academy Canada offers students with special learning needs today. However, the experience gained in helping Jeremy succeed went on to inform every aspect of the design of Academy Canada’s new learning management system (LMS), which is built on D2L’s Brightspace platform.
HARNESSING THE LATEST IN LEARNING TECHNOLOGY
Lisa Lovelady explains why D2L was the right partner to help Academy Canada build an LMS that puts accessibility as a top priority: “We saw that D2L’s Brightspace platform offered us the combination of rich functionality and ease of use we needed to support our entire community of instructors and learners—especially students with special learning needs.”

Working with the D2L team, Academy Canada designed digital courses and education tools in the Brightspace platform with a special focus on assistive technologies. For example, Brightspace integrates multisensory approaches from Kurzweil Education to help students who are living with dyslexia. Similarly, course materials are designed to include alternate text to describe images and diagrams, so people with visual impairments can have a richer learning experience.

Moreover, by providing more options for studying online and finding the right balance between interaction and individual study, the Brightspace platform is designed to support students who find a traditional classroom environment distracting—providing a learning environment that helps them maintain focus.

The focus on accessibility doesn’t just help students with special learning needs—it helps everyone. For example, the introduction of visual scheduling techniques was prompted by a desire to help people on the Autism spectrum manage their learning, but in reality, almost all students find them beneficial.

“Whenever it came to making design decisions for our courses, our philosophy was to keep accommodation at the front of our minds at all times,” says Lisa Lovelady. “For example, if we uploaded video clips to support a learning program, we wanted to ensure we could add subtitles later if we needed to. Capabilities like this are built into Brightspace to ensure that it’s straightforward to make courses accessible to students with special learning needs without complex and time-consuming retrofitting further down the line.”

MAKING THE CURRICULUM ACCESSIBLE TO ALL
Today, the Brightspace platform gives Academy Canada valuable additional tools to help students like Jeremy get a quality education.

Lisa Lovelady comments: “If for health reasons one of our students needs to repeat a course that we only run every two years, then our ability to give them the opportunity to complete that course online through Brightspace could be the difference between dropping out and graduating on time.”
Through the Brightspace platform, Academy Canada can offer learners greater flexibility in the way that they study—making its courses better for everyone.

“Throughout the process of deploying and configuring the Brightspace platform, we knew we would be supported by our leadership team and instructors—and that played a key role in the success of the project,” adds Lisa Lovelady. “That’s one of the big lessons we learned from working with Jeremy, and a principle that we applied directly when we were implementing the Brightspace platform: The commitment from his parents, and from his instructor Joanne Bennett, was instrumental in making it all work.”

“For example, Joanne was the one with boots on the ground every day, working with Jeremy and advocating for him. At the beginning of each semester, Joanne and I would meet to map out the courses that were coming up and work out where accommodations were needed to enable Jeremy to complete the assignments and tests. So when we were designing our Brightspace solution, we made sure that the ability to engage closely with instructors around the needs of individual students was built into the core of the platform.”

She continues: “Joanne’s philosophy was that we should aim to make minimal changes to ensure that Jeremy’s experience was as close as possible to the other students in his peer group. That commitment on her part was extremely inspiring to me. In fact, one of the things that I learned from working with Jeremy was just what an impact Joanne has on her students. When Jeremy graduated, it was an incredible feeling to see his parents and Joanne—who had all been there from the start—witnessing the positive outcome of the journey we’d all been on together.”

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKING WORLD
By enhancing its approach to education with online courses on the Brightspace platform, Academy Canada has been able to improve its service to students, providing more flexible solutions that ultimately help increase access to education.

“One of our key goals is to ensure that everyone who enrolls at Academy Canada completes their course successfully and can go on to have a successful career—and that’s exactly what the Brightspace platform empowers us to achieve,” says Lisa Lovelady.
Academy Canada’s online student enrollments continue to grow, essentially doubling each year. Starting with 40 online students in 2015 we just reached a cumulative total of over 1000 online students in less than 5 years. Our students continue to have more choices in online courses as our course offerings have increased from 32 to almost 200 over the last 5 years. Moreover, student satisfaction is at an all-time high: according to recent surveys, 98% of students would recommend Academy Canada to a friend.

Lisa Lovelady adds: “Other learning institutions have also recognized our success in this space, and we’ve seen an 80 percent increase in diploma-to-degree articulations: transfer agreements that allow our students to transfer credits from our programs to continue their studies in other colleges and academic programs.”

In March 2015, Jeremy Cross passed away— but his name and his achievements at Academy Canada are honored every year at the college’s convocation ceremony.

“The award for our Therapeutic Recreation program at our convocation is named for Jeremy, and the attributes he brought us are the ones that we look for when selecting each year’s winner—so his story is still very much a part of our story,” comments Lisa Lovelady. “When I see students who had faced great challenges when they first joined Academy Canada cross the stage wearing their convocation gown, it’s a hugely rewarding experience.”

Academy Canada has learned so much from Jeremy’s journey, and continues to apply those lessons as it uses the Brightspace platform to design ever-more accessible and engaging courses for students. As Lisa Lovelady concludes: “Working with D2L is making a big difference in our ability to help every student achieve success, year after year.”