Students are at the center of every Lab design challenge. Here, VWCC faculty and administrators are interviewing a current VWCC healthcare student to better understand his experience.

"The Education Design Lab brings new vision to workforce development in an era where we must take bold steps to accelerate wage growth and close skills gaps in our health care system. Stackable credentials will enable us to align our community college courses with the skills and competencies that aspiring healthcare professionals need, while meeting the needs of employers—and community health—alike." -Dr. Robert Sandel, president of Virginia Western Community College

Designing Stackable Pathways to In-Demand Healthcare Roles

G3 Healthcare Pathways Design Challenge

The Design Questions + Timeline

From April - October 2019, the Lab partnered with VWCC to work towards solutions for two design questions:

- How might we design employer-driven, stackable pathways that can lead to an AAS degree and prepare students for employment in the high-growth healthcare industry?
- How might we design a related "One Door" advising model that increases institutional efficiency and student success rates?

Background

As part of the G3 (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back) planning grant, Virginia Western Community College (VWCC), a member of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), participated in a state-wide collaborative effort to transform workforce programs, focused on industry sectors that offer high-demand, well-paying jobs.

The jobs data in VWCC’s service area is clear: Roanoke, VA, is the state’s largest southwestern municipality and serves as the medical center of western Virginia. From 2014 to 2024, the region expects to see an 18 percent growth in healthcare jobs. VWCC will play a key role in supplying skilled talent to meet both current and future employer demand in the fast-growing sector.¹

The purpose of the G3 Healthcare Pathways Design Challenge was two-fold: to identify stackable pathways for emerging high-demand jobs in healthcare and to design systems and processes that support VWCC students as they learn about and navigate through those pathways.

1 (data source: Go Virginia Region 2 Report; Emsi Q4 2018, VWCC Service Region)
Key Takeaways

The core design team conducted in-depth research and analysis of regional workforce data, as well as qualitative and quantitative institutional data—including student, employer, and stakeholder interviews. This research and analysis formed the foundation of a seven-month design process.

1. **Leverage regional workforce data**
   Emerging data on regional employment trends and average salary is making it easier to target skills and opportunity by region. Groups like Burning Glass, Emsi, LinkedIn, and more have developed data tools to help employers, institutions, and communities better understand regional economic growth projections. VWCC began by analyzing regional labor market data to map curricular offerings to economic opportunities—and to determine if those pathways would support the ability to earn a living wage in a career with sustainability.

2. **Look within and across degree pathways**
   Once the core design team identified where VWCC’s curricular offerings did (or did not) align with regional workforce trends, they were able to dig deeper and maximize existing pathways while also building new pathways for learners to earn higher wages and position themselves for advancement within their career field. The design process allowed VWCC’s design team to take a wide-lens view of their academic and workforce offerings, and to map new opportunities for stackable credentials within and across degree pathways.

3. **Focus on the learner experience**
   The research phase yielded several important themes regarding student experiences in healthcare pathways at VWCC. Namely, that students are often unsure of what options and pathways are available across multiple healthcare disciplines—and they face difficulty leveraging in-person and online resources when it comes to advising and career services. In designing new stackable pathways, VWCC focused on creating systems and processes that empower and support students throughout their academic journey.

The Pilots

VWCC designed, iterated, and refined three pilots. Together, these address the dual design questions of the challenge. The pilots will be implemented in Summer 2020, pending funding from the state.

**Find Your There**
The web-based service will allow students to navigate and explore the various healthcare pathways offered at VWCC. The pilot will rely heavily on career counseling. The pilot will initially feature pathways in healthcare and will then be scaled to other programs and pathways at VWCC.

**Dual Enrollment Academies**
This pilot will expand the current academy to include a “pre-health” option for students. The pathway will include prerequisite courses that will prepare high school students for a variety of restricted admission healthcare degrees at VWCC.

**2 Doors 2 Nursing**
Currently the RN program operates on a single admission cycle, only admitting in the fall. This pilot will introduce a spring admission cycle that will allow for more students to graduate into a high-need field. This pilot will also provide flexibility for learners who have to leave the program to be able to easily jump back in another semester (currently students have to wait for a year after a stop out).

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Regional Hot Careers Data Converted to Visible Micro-Pathways

- Physical Therapy Assistant
  - $30.93/hr
- Medical Laboratory Technician
  - $25.81/hr
- Certified Medical Assistant
  - $15.07/hr
- Phlebotomist
  - $16.01/hr

(data source: Emsi Q4 2018, VWCC Service Region)