Microsoft Technology Associate Certification

Microsoft Technology Associate Exams Help Students Determine Future Study Path While Boosting Confidence

Northwestern Michigan College

Computer Information Technology Program

Location:
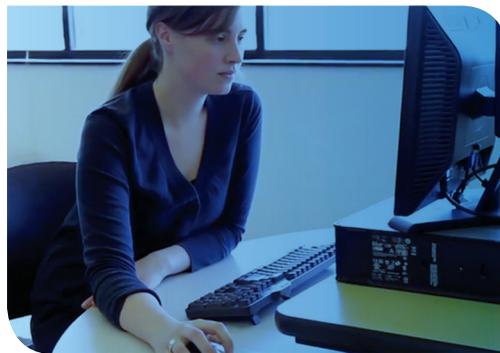Traverse City, Michigan

Total School Enrollment:
170 students per year

Success Metrics:
- Entry-level certification
- Preparation for further technical training
- Employer-valued credential

Microsoft®
Technology Associate

Northwestern Michigan College Offers Entry-Level Microsoft Certification to Community College IT Students

CHALLENGE

Northwestern Michigan College (NMC) is a publicly funded community college that serves more than 5,200 students annually in academic programs. NMC offers associate degrees, professional certificates and also serves a much greater population through extended educational services.

Ten years ago, faculty and administrators in the Computer Information Technology (CIT) program at NMC read a report from the U.S. Department of Education that discussed the importance of IT certification.

"We always try to keep a pulse on what the business community is looking for so when we heard about the emergence of certification and how industry had defined objectives and assessments, we knew we needed to embrace this change," said Keith E. Kelly, NMC's MTA program coordinator.

NMC integrated its CIT program with the technology certification courses already offered in order to give students the opportunity to earn certification while they worked towards a degree. The new program worked well to serve both recent high school graduates and adults seeking re-training for the workforce. However, CIT staff quickly noticed a gap in their offerings —several certifications were available for students on a networking path such as CompTIA and Cisco, but students on the developer path had few options.

"Our developer students worked towards earning the Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist (MCTS) certificate, which was very tough to achieve in the scope of a two-year community college degree," Kelly said. "But, we needed to fill this gap and provide them with a more attainable, introductory certification."

SOLUTION

In the search for a better certification solution for CIT students, NMC learned of a new entry-level credential for those seeking to explore and pursue a career using Microsoft technology.

When Microsoft and Certiport launched the Microsoft Technology Associate (MTA) certification program in 2010, NMC was among few chosen to pilot the MTA exams.

"We integrated the MTA database exam immediately into our SQL Server Database course and it was a perfect fit," said Kelly. "The exam was just what we needed — an introductory certification that our students could complete during a two-year program

to prove they have the capacity to go on and earn other, more challenging certifications in the future."

Since NMC was already a Microsoft IT Academy and a Certiport Authorized Testing Center, the MTA exam was easily integrated into the curriculum. NMC purchased an MTA Site License, which allows staff to deliver a high volume of exams for one flat price. "MTA was an obvious choice for us, and it is very cost effective when you compare it to the value it is providing in terms of data reporting and the value of certification in the industry," Kelly said.

With MTA implemented, Kelly and other faculty at NMC began to use it for continuous process improvement. By analyzing student test scores, instructors can immediately adjust their teaching methods or curriculum to focus on problem areas. "Certiport offers excellent reporting that lets me see my students' data as soon as they complete their final exams," said Kelly. "I can run an aggregate report of exam objectives telling me how my students performed and I can make changes accordingly."

The MTA certification program includes developer exams and networking exams, and NMC integrated the exams directly into existing CIT courses.

"I think one of the biggest benefits of the MTA solution is having industry experts specifying their expectations," Kelly said. "So before, it was really my responsibility to decide what to teach in my class and what skills my students needed to learn. With MTA certification, we started teaching to outcomes defined by the industry."

RESULTS

The MTA certifications exams have integrated seamlessly into the curriculum at NMC, and both students and faculty are seeing the benefits of implementing the exam. NMC has awarded 231 MTA certifications.

Scott Goethals, CIT department head and instructor, has found that the MTA exams are helping students determine their next steps for further studies or entering the workforce. "I see the MTA exams as a type of litmus test — students can use them to determine if this is really the right career path for them or not," Goethals said. "Students may know they want to do something with computers, but the MTA exams can help them determine their aptitude for infrastructure or development, and then pursue further studies in the areas in which they excel."

Perhaps most importantly, MTA is meeting the needs and wants of local and global IT employers. Kevin Bozung, Principal of Michigan-based Safety Net, Inc., has a close relationship with NMC and sits on the advisory board for the CIT program. "As we're looking for new employees and sorting resumes, the certifications really do stand out," Bozung said. "We'll often look at a stack of resumes and bring in the candidates with certifications, since it tells us they have the base skills that have been set by the industry. Even if they just have a set of basic Microsoft skills, they are going to stand out above those who do not."

Bozung also explains that companies like his are looking for experience if they can find it, but certification is the next best thing: "When we are competing for jobs, our clients want to know how much experience our team has. Even if they are new employees, we can list their certifications and that helps us win business over a competitor."

From Kelly's perspective, the main goal of the community college is job preparation. "Students are coming back to college after years in industry and they are looking for re-training, they are looking to better themselves," Kelly said. "Certification just adds that additional credential they can take with them and it makes them even more marketable."
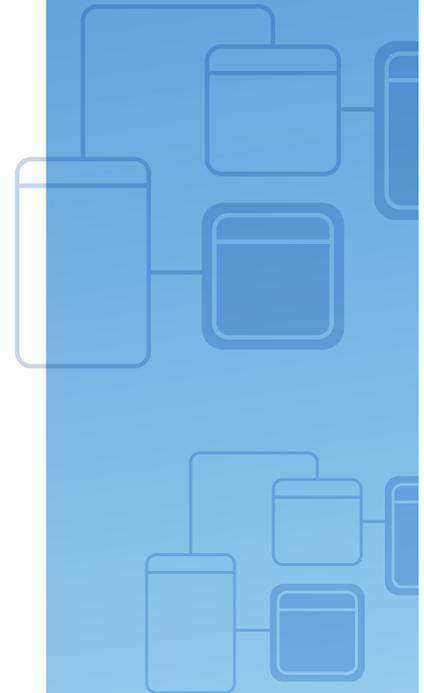
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Opportunities to thrive in IT:

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– **Keith E. Kelly, NMC's MTA Program Coordinator**

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