

Montana Digital Academy:
No Limits on Learning

AT A GLANCE:

CHALLENGE:

Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) aspired to provide rigorous curricular options for students across Montana and improve credit recovery success.

SOLUTION:

MTDA implemented Blackboard Classroom and the Personalized Learning Designer to create a virtual school and improve credit recovery success.

RESULTS:

95% of Montana High Schools use MTDA to expand opportunities for students and MTDA has achieved a 99% success rate in credit recovery for 3 years running

Montana Digital Academy removes geographic and learning barriers and makes learning as easy as possible

Challenge:

Montana Digital Academy (MTDA), located in Missoula, was created to ensure students across the vast State of Montana have access to quality teachers and rigorous curriculum in core subject areas—regardless of school size or geographic location—through unique online education opportunities.

Montana ranks 48th in the United States in terms of population density, followed only by Wyoming and Alaska, averaging just 7.1 people per square mile creating unique challenges for K-12 education. In contrast, New Jersey boasts 1,210.1 people per square mile. Due to the limited populations, students in rural areas do not have equal access to specialty curriculum such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, unique subjects, and electives, nor teachers qualified for these curricular areas, in the traditional brick and mortar high schools across the state.

MTDA identified two key challenges across the state:

1. Low credit-recovery success due to non-adaptable curriculum, lack of student support, and inflexible learning modalities
2. Lack of rigorous curricular options such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, electives, and unique subjects for students in rural areas and home schools

Solution:

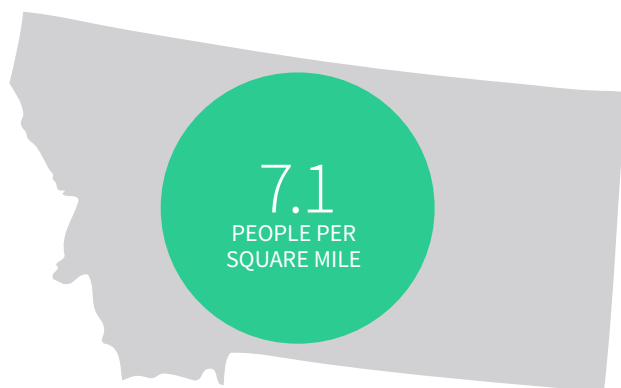
Statewide virtual school with personalized credit recovery powered by Blackboard Classroom

In 2009, MTDA was established to better serve rural areas of Montana lacking resources and qualified teachers. MTDA's Executive Director Robert Currie and his team designed the statewide virtual school to provide a superior, high-touch, adaptive and flexible learning experience for all students.

MTDA's main goal is to break down barriers and make learning as easy as possible for students across Montana. Specifically, by providing private, and home-school students throughout Montana access to teachers who are actively employed and licensed by the Montana Public School System, have an endorsement in their subject area, and are trained in online instructional techniques.

Montana Digital Academy enables schools that had previously been unable to offer higher-level curriculum due to the state's rural nature and lack of qualified teachers to do so.

Additionally, students looking for a challenge can take AP classes, elective courses, and subjects that may not be available in their local schools. What's more, these are not just any courses. MTDA and the University of Montana have established a unique, one-of-a-kind partnership among the 29 statewide online schools across the United States. The MTDA Administration is housed on the University of Montana campus within the Phyllis J. Washington College of Education and Human Sciences. In fact, MTDA is the only state online program that is part of a College of Education at a major research university.



Population Density of Montana

To ensure courses are of the highest quality and in compliance with all relevant education and distance learning rules, standards, and policies, MTDA creates most of its courses and actively participates in the Virtual School Leadership Alliance (VSLA). Through active participation in the VSLA, it has become one of the most effective online learning academies in the United States.

Through Blackboard Classroom, students can access coursework whenever and wherever they want—24 hours a day, 365 days a year—effectively lengthening the school day and the school year across Montana. In fact, summer school accounts for approximately 20% of enrollments. With more time and flexibility to complete their coursework, students face virtually zero course conflicts and are better equipped to graduate on time.

Offering broad program variety

MTDA is designed to meet the needs of all students—whether they’re looking for a challenge or facing one. With the flexibility of Blackboard Classroom, MTDA is able to offer a variety of programs, including:

- **Original Credit and Advanced Placement**

These traditional online classes are taught in a cohort, semester-based format. They cover a range of core courses such as English II, U.S. Government, and Geometry, as well as unique and popular electives like Oceanography, AP Computer Science, and Criminology.

- **Credit Recovery**

MTDA Credit Recovery courses are aimed at students who have previously failed a particular course in a face-to-face setting. This program strikes a careful balance between rigor and the support and flexibility needed by a struggling student.

- **Middle School Multi-Language Sampler**

This workshop-style program introduces middle school students to both the world languages and the online learning experience. Middle school is a time of exploration and discovery for students. The seven-week programs offer sixth, seventh, and eighth graders an opportunity to explore up to five different languages—Spanish, French, German, Latin, and Mandarin Chinese—before beginning high school. MTDA also offers a “Stepping Stones” workshop for students who might struggle with the format, giving them an opportunity to prepare for a more challenging language program later in their academic pathway.



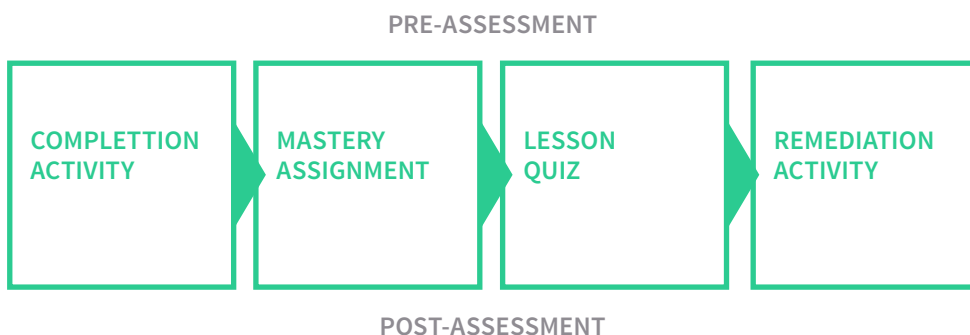
Overcoming credit recovery challenges

Amongst these various programs, MTDA places particular focus on increasing credit recovery success, student engagement, and, ultimately, graduation rates. Due to non-adaptable curriculum, inflexibility, and lack of support and communication, many students had trouble earning credit for courses with a former credit recovery course provider. To overcome these challenges, MTDA switched to Blackboard Classroom and Montana certified teacher developed courses to implement systemic improvements in credit recovering including:

- Mastery-inspired, linear learning pathways
- Automated communication between students, teachers, parents, and coaches

Mastery-inspired learning

Before MTDA leveraged Blackboard Classroom and the Personal Learning Designer (PLD) to improve the Credit Recovery experience, MTDA Assistant Director Jason Neiffer and his team examined activity logs of students within their former digital learning environment. They found that at least three to four (sometimes upwards of 12) students would click around randomly within the course, spending a significant amount of time (25-40 hours) making no progress. They also found that students were not completing written assignments. Therefore, those students would miss out on teacher feedback and the learning experience, which reflected in their test scores.



Instructional Program Director Mike Agostinelli credits Blackboard Classroom and the creation of linear learning pathways with improving student engagement and increasing the chances that the student will complete and master the course.

“By compelling the linear pathway, we help teach credit recovery students how to learn,” he says. Using

the PLD in Blackboard Classroom, MTDA breaks down courses into modules so students feel a greater sense of accomplishment at each milestone.

“We build a linear learning path that chunks learning into bite-size pieces so students can experience small successes to motivate them to move through the course,” says Agostinelli.

Each module begins with a pre-assessment and ends with a post-assessment. If students demonstrate 80% mastery or better in the pre-assessment, they test out of the module. However, if students demonstrate below 80% mastery, they must complete the module. Within each module, students participate in mastery assignments, a lesson quiz, and a remediation activity if they score less than 80% mastery on the quiz. Students finish a module with a completion activity and post-assessment, in which they must demonstrate 65% mastery or better to move onto the next module.

“From my point of view as a classroom teacher, students rarely have the opportunity to go back and change or redo work until they get it right in a traditional setting. With this model, students can’t give up,” says Kate Peterson, English IA Credit Recovery teacher and English subject matter expert/developer.

Automated Communication

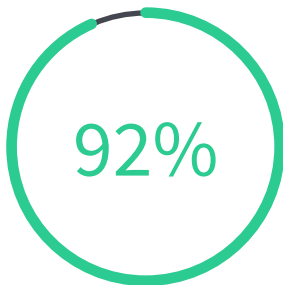
In order to create a high-touch experience, the PLD in Blackboard Classroom automates communications amongst teachers, students, parents, local support, and the learning environment. For example, a teacher receives automated notices from the learning environment upon each milestone, completion of a mastery assignment, or failure to meet mastery requirements. These automatic notices prompt the teacher to grade an assignment or follow up with the student. In this way, students receive immediate feedback and support from their teacher after each attempt.



95%
of all Montana high schools have leveraged MTDA.

“There is a lot of pressure in education, in general, for communication. The PLD [in Blackboard Classroom] automates a lot of things we should be doing anyway,” says Peterson. “It guarantees that parents, students, and local support in the school are receiving the information they should in order to help the student succeed... It enhances the good work teachers do.”

With communication automated, MTDA is able to set a standard for parents and local schools. “There’s no break in communication. The PLD helps MTDA provide a very consistent message and experience for students across the state,” says Neiffer.



92%
of MTDA credit recovery students report they are satisfied or very satisfied

Results:

In striving to provide access to rigorous curricular options for all students in Montana and improve credit recovery success, MTDA demonstrates clear success on both counts.

First, MTDA expands access to rigorous curricular options such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, electives, and unique subjects and qualified teachers—regardless of school size or geographic location.

- 95% of all high schools in Montana have leveraged
- MTDA currently offers 14 AP courses, 59 Core and Elective Courses, 17 Credit Recovery Courses, and 5 Middle School Language Sampler Courses.
- MTDA averages 6,688 enrollments per year with a success rate of 87% and has served over 30,000 enrollments through Spring 2016

With respect to improving credit recovery success, 92% of all credit recovery students report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their experience. Even better than the 92% satisfaction rate, MTDA’s Credit Recovery students clearly love the program and benefit from it:

- “I love this online course and Montana Digital Academy in general. It’s just a great experience and it’s just like the physical class, but I personally like MTDA much more just because there is no procrastination. It is very formatted and the expectations make you do your absolute best on the course.”
- “The course was easy to clear and covered the whole semester we went over in class. I feel like it’s a better way for students like me to show just what they know and what they retained from their class, rather than relying on daily assignments to judge how smart someone is.”
- “I absolutely loved having this as an option because I will be able to graduate on time because of this program! I like that it was easy to access and easy to get done in a timely manner.”
- “I liked that I was able to move at my own pace and I liked having it as an option because I am behind in high school credits. It is a great way to get caught up and be able to graduate on time.”

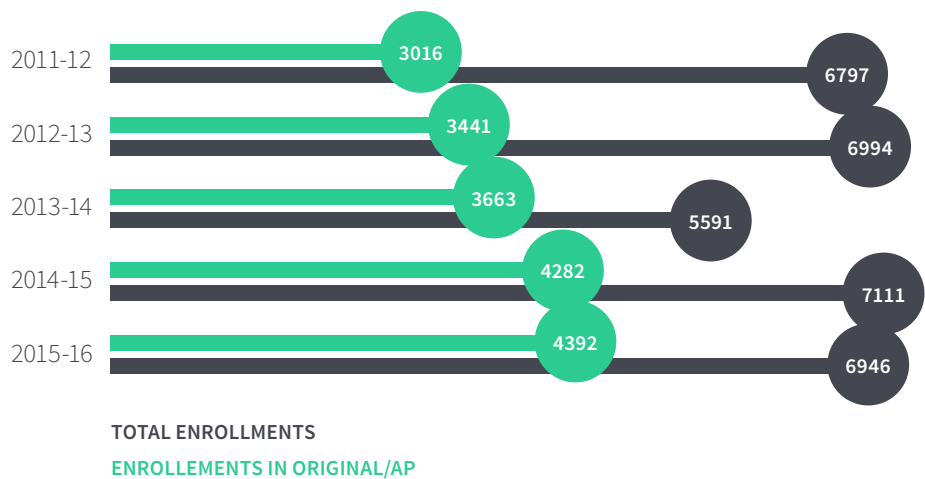
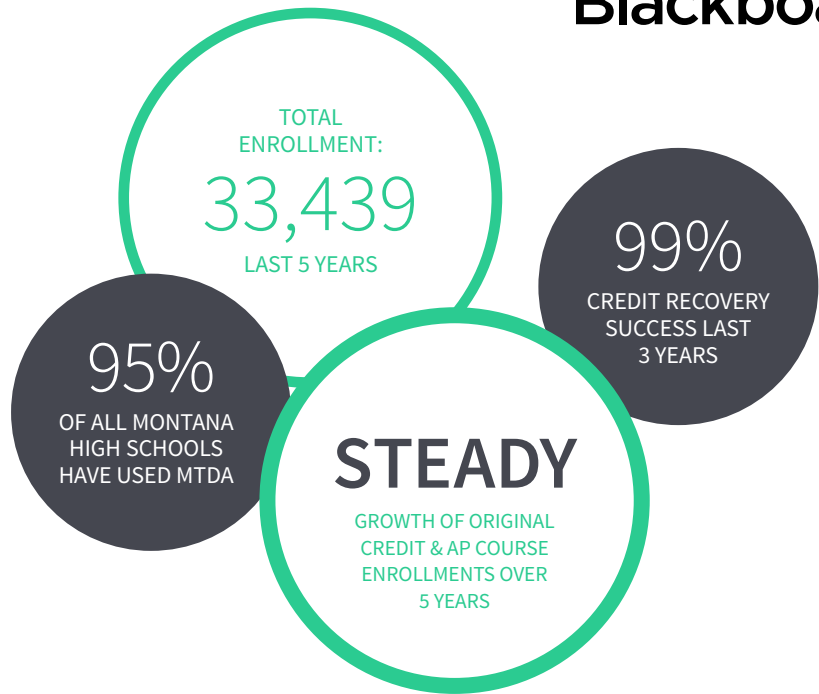
Finally, MTDA boast a 90% average success rate in Credit Recovery Courses with an outstanding 99% success rate since implementing enhancements powered by Blackboard Classroom’s PLD.



99%
SUCCESS RATE
in credit recovery after implementing PLD enhancements.

ABOUT MONTANA DIGITAL ACADEMY

- Created in 2009 in Statute 20-7-1201 by the Montana legislature
- Housed on the campus of the University of Montana within the Phyllis J. Washington College of Education and Human Sciences in Missoula, Montana
- The only state online program that is a part of a College of Education at a major research university
- Partners with 29 statewide online schools across the United States
- Actively participates in the Virtual School Leadership Alliance (VSLA)
- Offers 14 AP Courses, 59 Core & Elective Courses, 17 Credit Recovery Courses, & 5 Middle School Language Sampler Courses
- Served 6,785 course enrollments in SY 2013-14 with one of the highest online course enrollments relative to student population in the country
- Served 33,439 course enrollments from Fall 2011 to Spring 2016.
- Achieved 99% Credit Recovery Success Rate last three years after implementing Blackboard Classroom PLD enhancements



“With Blackboard Classroom, we have data for making data-driven decisions. It gives us actionable data to make the program better. We’re using that data to keep refining and improving educational opportunities for students across Montana.”

Mike Agostinelli, MTDA Instructional Program Director