

Community College Students Hack for the Future

Western Governors University brings its innovative approach to education in DemocracyLab's latest hackathon event.



What was the event?

Western Governors University (WGU) understands that tech is the future. On May 15, 2021, WGU partnered with five community colleges and worked with DemocracyLab to sponsor an online Hack for the Future event for tech students. The students got the opportunity to practice and learn new tech skills while improving tech-for-good initiatives ranging from civic infrastructure and social services to environmental research and conservation. Everyone who participated agreed the event was a rewarding educational experience.

How ~~do~~ the hackathons empower students?

WGU is reshaping education with its online performance-based approach. ~~Students build on their previous knowledge and experience, and are assessed based on their competence in their chosen field. This~~ Their dynamic education model prepares students for the evolving demands of tech industries.

A partnership with DemocracyLab was natural.

Our virtual hackathon offers the perfect space for students to apply classroom learning to real world projects. ~~These events are~~ collaborative environment, with a narrow scope focusing on clear, incremental improvements towards the project's long term goals. The students got hands-on experience with the project's software or backend code, building their confidence by applying knowledge towards concrete deliverables.

Many students at the WGU Hack for the Future event also ~~had the opportunity to~~ described the excitement of working with software or technology for the first time. Furthermore, they made connections with the project leaders and other students that can last beyond the event.

Commented [1]: This sentence doesn't answer the header question and is maybe not needed.

Commented [2]: I didn't mean for the section to be a strict Q&A. The headers are meant more as topic intros; the content is somewhat looser. But if the question phrasing is misleading I'm open to rephrasing (any suggestions?)

Commented [3]: Feels like it belongs in the second section because it's related to the student experience.

Commented [4]: Related to the above comment, the sections aren't strict topic-bound. The intro paragraph is meant as a summary of the whole event, such that if someone read only the first paragraph they'd get the gist of the entire article. (The rest of the article then gets into the details.) This quick stat lends some credibility to the success of the event, necessary info in the summary.

Commented [5]: I'd suggest changing this to be less general. E.g. "How did the hackathon empower students".

Commented [6]: Good call.

Commented [7]: This is good information but about WGU's pedagogy and is maybe more depth than is needed. What if we combine the first sentence of this paragraph with the first of the second paragraph and delete the rest?

Commented [8]: One goal of the article is to highlight WGU as an innovator in education. I was trying to connect WGU's education model to DLab's approach to volunteerism, but agree this phrasing feels out of place, somewhat forced. Moved part down to the "learn more" section

Commented [9]: Oh ok. That frame makes sense. I like the way you've rewritten it. The tone fits the article well.

Commented [10]: Feels like it goes in the next section since it pertains to student feedback.

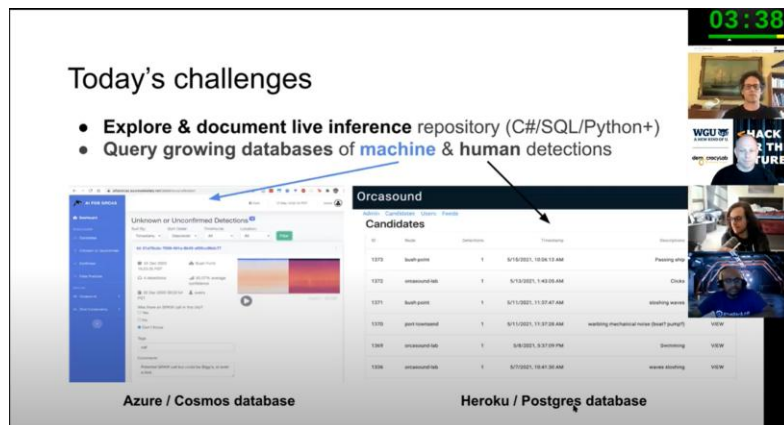
Commented [11]: The detail sort of spans both sections (learning new skills is empowering). I liked the detail here since it's more anecdotal (comments made during presentations), but I can see how it sounds more like survey results/direct feedback. I've rephrased to avoid the confusion.

What did the students think about the event?

The event opened pathways for a diverse group of community college students to learn by doing while contributing to important public interest technology projects. Following the event, students and faculty were surveyed, and two key themes surfaced:

- **Learn by doing:** All students and faculty agreed the event was a valuable opportunity to apply learnings to real-world projects and to learn new technologies and skills.
- **Sense of worth:** All the students surveyed agreed the event increased their belief they can make a difference in the world, and would participate in a similar event in the future.

As one student put it, “for this project, I realized, in that environment, I was the resident expert. And it felt great to be able to contribute!”



Students presenting the work they did during the Hack for the Future event.

What projects did they work on?

The students split into teams where they worked together and with project managers to tackle a specific problem the project was facing. Some of the skills the students utilized included bug testing and troubleshooting, building or testing open source code, security testing, and data analysis. The **technologies they worked on** address a wide array of social and environmental causes:

- **A/B Street:** a game simulation of pedestrians, bicycles, cars, and buses using real city maps; players edit lanes and intersections to improve traffic flow.
- **Every Voice Engaged:** an online platform helping citizens, governments, and nonprofit organizations solve problems that benefit from civic engagement.
- **iSeaTree:** a game-play app that lets kids learn, identify, and record trees in the USA and Canada.

Commented [12]: Describes how the event empowers the students and goes in the previous section "Empowering Student".

Commented [13]: This section comes from survey results. It's evidence of how the students felt empowered, but I feel belongs in its own section (partly to give more weight to the students own words, and partly to keep the sections more or less equal length).

Commented [14]: Adding the survey results help anchor the section opening into it's own theme. I think it works here the way you've edited it.

Commented [15]: change to past tense

Commented [16]: The projects are ongoing, thus the present tense. But I see how "project" could refer both the work done at the hackathon and the ongoing development on the technologies. Reworded.

- [Orcasound - Listen for Whales](#): an open source web-app that lets users listen for whales and act to conserve them.
- [ShelterApp](#): an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization helping homeless and low-income families connect to social services.
- [The Butterfly Project](#): a project analysing public data and creating technology to mitigate the cumulative effects of systemic racism.

By empowering students to become agents of change, WGU and DemocracyLab help underrepresented communities to gain access to the booming tech economy and to challenge ineffective power structures.

Where can I learn more?

Solutions to social and environmental problems will be tech-driven. Shifting to online spaces allows for an inclusive, global collaboration, expanding opportunities for citizen science efforts with decentralized (cloud and open source) databases. [Check out the resources below to learn how you can get involved.](#)

Western Governors University is a nonprofit, regionally accredited online college offering over 60 degrees in Business, IT, Healthcare, and Education. [Unlike traditional universities, students build on their previous knowledge and experience, and are assessed based on their competence in their chosen field.](#) For more information, visit [their website](#).

To get more involved in DemocracyLab's projects, check out our [upcoming events](#). Or if you'd like to contribute long term, check out our [projects listings](#). Signing up for a project is easy and free.

If you've got a tech-for-good project in need of volunteers, simply [create an account](#) with us, upload your project, and start recruiting!

Commented [17]: Consider moving to "empowering students" section

Commented [18]: I think it works fine here. This sentence is more about the projects, how they "help underrepresented communities." The wording of the lead-in phrase calls back to the previous topics and reiterates that theme.

Commented [19]: I'm not sure what this sentence is about. What entity are we learning more about here?

Commented [20]: Simply a concluding statement, meant to echo the opening sentence. I agree it felt a bit out of place, so I added a line to help it flow into the resource list better :)

Commented [21]: This is a nice addition.

Commented [22]: This is good information but about WGU's pedagogy and is maybe more depth than is needed. What if we combine the first sentence of this paragraph with the first of the second paragraph and delete the rest?

Commented [23]: One goal of the article is to highlight WGU as an innovator in education. I was trying to connect WGU's education model to DLab's approach to volunteerism, but agree this phrasing feels out of place, somewhat forced. Moved part down to the "learn more" section

Commented [24]: Oh ok. That frame makes sense. I like the way you've rewritten it. The tone fits the article well.

Commented [25]: It looks great! I really like the changes you've made.