

How Brandon Mowery Built a Custom Lab for Hands-On Learning with **ACI Skill Labs**

Brandon Mowery is an adjunct professor teaching four master's-level cybersecurity courses at Neumann University — including a penetration testing course and a cryptography course that he's built around hands-on practice. He came to ACI Skill Labs the same way many instructors do: through a professor who used them before him. But what kept him there was something he couldn't find anywhere else.



The Challenge:

Concept-heavy content without the tools to bring it to life

Brandon completed both his undergraduate and master's programs at Neumann, and when he took over the courses as an adjunct, he wanted to make sure he had more than just theory and slides for his students—he wanted to make sure they were getting the most out of their courses.

The challenge was practical: no off-the-shelf lab set existed that fit a standalone cryptography course. Brandon needed something he could build himself, affordably, and actually assign.



The biggest privilege of using ACI Skill Labs is the fact that you can create custom sets.



The Solution:

Custom lab sets built from the ground up

That's what drew him to ACI Skill Labs — and what he still considers its most valuable feature.



The fact that I'm able to customize it, I think it's really the best part.



Brandon's process is deliberate. For the cryptography set, he went through every cryptography lab in the ACI catalog, evaluated each one himself, and narrowed it down to 20. His criteria: the lab has to be substantive, take at least 30 minutes, and require students to actually work through multiple steps. He assigns 3 to 4 labs per week across a seven-week course. The result is a curated lab experience his students couldn't get from any single competing platform.



Results:

Concepts that stick because students have lived them

For abstract topics like public key infrastructure, the difference between reading about it and doing it is the difference between knowing it and understanding it.

"One of the hardest concepts is understanding public key encryption — there's a public and private key, you keep the private key, use the public key to encrypt messages," Brandon explains. **"Having a student go into a lab and actually perform the public key encryption is really valuable versus just presenting slides on the topic."**

That hands-on reinforcement is exactly what he felt was missing when he was a student — and exactly what he's now able to give his students. The labs, he says, cement the ideas in a way that a textbook simply can't.

He also notes what matters practically for instructors: affordability and flexibility.

"I've gotten to know the pricing model."

I try to keep it relatively affordable,"

he says — particularly compared to platforms that price students out entirely.



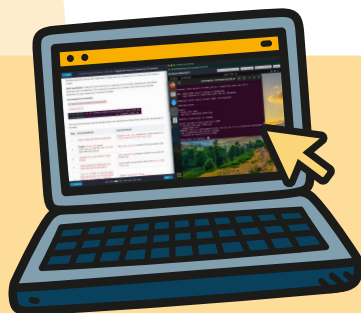
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Looking Ahead

Brandon keeps an eye on the ACI catalog as new labs are added — including the AI-focused labs he's already noticed. His cryptography set is complete and he's happy with it. His pen testing set is next on his list to update with ACI— because customizing and aligning your syllabus is easy with Skill Labs.

For any instructor thinking about whether to invest the time in building a custom set, his view is straightforward: the upfront work pays off. **"The biggest privilege of using ACI Skill Labs is the fact that you can create custom sets."**



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