

User Story



How City University of Seattle eliminated setup friction with **ACI Skill Labs**

Scott Zhou is a content developer and associate faculty at the School of Technology & Computing at City University of Seattle (CityU), where he oversees curriculum development and quality assurance across the technology and computing programs. He also teaches courses in computer science, data science, and AI. He runs ACI Skill Labs across approximately 10 courses in the department. For Zhou and the team, it's become one of their highest-rated platforms by students.



The Challenge:

Setup friction that derails learning before it starts

In traditional programming courses, students arrive to the first assignment and immediately hit a wall: download software, find an extension, install a plugin, navigate to an open-source repository. For a career-changer with limited tech background working after a full day at their current job, it can be challenging.

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A lot of students, we found out, are struggling," Zhou explains. "Our primary student population might not have a lot of tech background" and that is where Skill labs can bridge that gap.

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CityU also faced a separate challenge on the reliability side. Open-source tools get retired. Links break. A course built around a particular tool can become unusable overnight — sometimes while the quarter is actively running. "We actually have some cases where we legitimately just developed the content last month and then they retired the entire tool plus the website," Zhou says. "We had to redesign everything at the last minute."



The Solution:

Click and learn — reliably

ACI Skill Labs eliminated both problems at once. Students open a browser, click into the lab, and start working. No downloads, no configuration, no version conflicts.

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"You can just click and then run the lab and just focus on your learning — the concept — instead of frustrating yourself installing all different types of tools," Zhou says. "Especially because they might also have a full-time job at the same time, most students are doing their assignments over the weekend, when we typically don't have any TA available."

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The reliability piece matters just as much. **"Lab are always there, always available,"** he says. **"They can still proceed with their work"** regardless of what happens in the broader open-source ecosystem.

CityU is also fully integrated on LTI, and Zhou has watched the platform mature significantly — from fully manual workflows to LTI 1.1, and now to 1.3, where setup is a matter of a few clicks rather than manual URL configuration.



Results:

Students focused on learning, not logistics

Across the department's courses, labs run on a structured cadence — between 5 and 20 per course depending on credit hours — with auto-grading through LTI feeding directly into the LMS. For instructors teaching multiple sections, that time saving is significant.

The clearest example Zhou remembers is from the Secure Systems Programming course, where a master's student had a real breakthrough working through the labs.

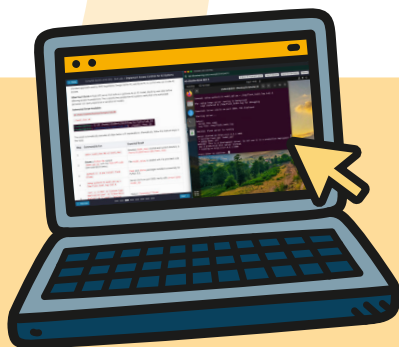
"Typical programmers want to build — add features, ship what the customer wants," Zhou says. **"Security never enters the picture."** The labs changed that. After graduating and landing a job, the student credited that course directly: it taught him to think like a security engineer, not just a feature-shipper.



Looking Ahead

CityU's model is centralized — Zhou and the program directors own the curriculum, and labs are standardized across sections. As the department grows and demand for in-person courses increases, having a consistent, reliable, browser-based lab foundation becomes even more important.

For Zhou, the value comes down to three things he'd tell any colleague considering it: automated grading that saves real time at scale, zero installation overhead so students can get straight to learning, and content that stays exclusive to enrolled students — reinforcing the value of the program itself.



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