

*Exeter, New Hampshire*

Year Started: 2010

Students Enrolled:

High School: 1,400

Instructional Model: Online courses and work-based experiences at training centers and businesses

Located in Exeter, New Hampshire (NH), Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) opened in 2010 as the state virtual school. VLACS offers part-time and full-time online learning options for students and partners with school districts across the state and provides career-based learning opportunities. In 2019–20, VLACS served 12,500 students. Scott Prescott, VLACS's Instructional Program Manager, shared, "When we started offering career-based learning opportunities, we did this in conjunction with the state-supported 'extended learning opportunities' or ELO initiative."

Over time, VLACS has continued to expand students' opportunities to explore, learn about, and experience careers. For instance, VLACS has developed partnerships with hundreds of professionals and many businesses and organizations in NH and surrounding states. The VLACS instructional program manager works directly with businesses, organizations, and professionals to create partnerships. Through these partnerships, students get the chance to meet with professionals to learn about careers and career pathways, complete virtual or in-person job shadows, or engage in micro-internships. Additionally, students may select from over 100 career-related course offerings, allowing students to explore a variety of career options through various entry points or to pursue focused learning about a specific career. VLACS micro-internships provide students an opportunity to work with professionals to complete tasks directly related to a career of interest. These range in time required and credit value depending on the competencies students are mastering and tasks they take on. Typically, the micro-internships last between two weeks to a few months and consist of significant contact time with professionals.

In one example, a graduate of VLACS, Kai Dennett, engaged in a number of micro-internships. Kai worked with a former journalist for the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* to help develop his writing skills. He also worked as a writer alongside a Broadway playwright and a graphic artist designing tour posters for a rapper. Because of all of his connections, Dennett proceeded to produce his first gallery show and is now working as a freelance design artist for marketing companies. VLACS also offers Career Connections sessions in which a professional discusses their process for becoming who they are. For instance, Chris Zecco works as the Video and Motion Design Manager at a marketing agency in Nashua, NH. Zecco partnered with VLACS to present during Career Connections. Zecco spoke to students about his company, his industry background, how he got to where he is, and what students can expect going into this field. These sessions help students get acclimated with the opportunities available without having to jump into anything before they know much about a certain path.

As Dr. Steve Kossakoski, Executive Director of VLACS, shared,

There are a lot of areas that work well online along with work-based learning in businesses. There are also some programs where a small percentage of the program will work online but the majority will need to be done at a physical location. These work-based learning opportunities allow students to fully jump into career exploration in a way that provides them with direct connections and experiences in the industry. Students can begin with courses first and then participate in work-based experiences or they can start a work-based experience and then enroll in a course. Students also have the option to earn credit through experiences, which allows them to design work-based projects aligned with academic and/or career competencies. Kai Dennett's example demonstrates that flexibility. Some of his work-based learning opportunities were fully online, and some required him to have in-person meetings.

Students can explore, through internships and other career exploration options, before they commit to any one path. Once they choose a path, students can earn certifications by completing groups of courses in the pathway. For instance, as Prescott explained, "Let's say a kid wants to become an EMT. They learn a lot of the theory with us. But then we say, 'Go to your local fire department, and see if you can volunteer there.'" Steve Kossakoski, Executive Director of VLACS, explained, "We offer complete customization. Kids come to us and propose something. 'I've got a mentor, I've got a business to work at, and I want to earn academic credit to be a nuclear scientist.' We help them explore their interests in flexible ways."

VLACS added a badging component to all career related learning, which allows students to show what they have earned to industry professionals. Since 2019, VLACS has awarded 4,500 career-focused badges. Kossakoski emphasized, "What we're doing here is not about digital learning. It's about expanding the opportunity to democratize student experiences. For many kids, their schedule doesn't allow them to participate in a wide range of useful career experiences." VLACS has found that there are some places in their state where there is no CTE center and/or no qualified teachers to teach certain CTE programs. VLACS brings those centers supplemental content to support their efforts to meet all students' needs.

Prescott continued, "Our goal is to make the existing CTE centers more robust in what they can offer. We want them to have the ability for a student, regardless of their location in the state, to be able to access a wider range of options." In this way, students complete their curriculum online and only have to go to the CTE center for a smaller amount of time for the work that requires hands-on learning. Ultimately, VLACS is working to become a career technical education program.