

Motlow's Unique Program Finder Tool Fuels Dreams and Exploration

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Planning for college is easier with the right tools. Motlow State Community College built a custom, easy-to-use Program Finder that has become the College's number one website resource. Motlow's Program Finder is a robust, graphic-rich database of all the degrees, certificates, and learning options available at the College. It allows students to view, search, and compare various learning options and find the program that best meets their needs. It is one of the nation's first college program search tools to incorporate credit and non-credit learning pathways into one search instrument.

Most four-year universities have some sort of program search tool, but very few have the depth of filtering options and breadth of helper content found in Motlow's Program Finder. However, very few two-year colleges have this type of tool at all. Further, it is rare to find any college where degree plans are marketed side-by-side with short-term training and industry-recognized certifications.

"Prospective students sometimes delay college aspirations because they are unsure what they want to study. The Program Finder makes college dreaming, degree planning, and interest



Front Row: Dr. Tony Millican, left, and Scott Shasteen; Back Row: Davis Seal, left, and Dr. Terri Bryson



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exploration easily accessible. On the other hand, some prospective students already have a clear vision of what they want to study. So, they need to know if Motlow has the program to meet their needs. The Program Finder answers those questions quickly, too,” said Terri Bryson, vice president of External Affairs at Motlow. “The world is changing. There are great careers available through non-traditional pathways like one-year diplomas, modular training, and short-term certifications. We need to practice the inclusion we preach and work to make certain all students know about all of the options available to them. Our Program Finder includes every possible pathway because we strive to practice inclusion at every possible touchpoint.”

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Program Finder Tool

COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

“We collaborated with colleagues across the institution to make certain that we built something that met the broadest needs possible. Stakeholders included faculty, workforce development, recruiters, advisors, and senior leadership,” said Scott Shasteen, director of communications and media relations at Motlow.

“The Program Finder at Motlow has approximately 4,400 visitors each week. While we were confident that there was a huge need for a tool like this, we are delightedly surprised at how quickly it has been adopted and how fast it has grown in utilization. Our results are what motivated us to tell our story. We want everyone to know how helpful it is,” said Bryson.

The tool's design has been a transformational instrument at Motlow. The Program Finder now speaks the language of prospective users, and it is organized by topics, not by college departments.

“The first time we demonstrated the Program Finder to our colleagues, we keyed in healthcare as a keyword example. The tool populated nursing, pre-medical professional degrees, paramedics, and medical office management,” recounted Shasteen. “One of our colleagues thought there was an error because medical office management is a business field and not part of the health sciences. We explained that the search results are designed to cross-sell all of our services and to

speak to student interests, and not reinforce internal department divisions or silos. It was like a lightbulb went off. Everyone immediately saw the power of the tool to communicate to students using their lens instead of college-jargon.”

Student Success and Workforce Development are central to the Motlow mission. The best way to pursue those mission objectives is to start by helping learners identify their own areas of interest and then to help them match that with the College’s breadth of programming. The Program Finder was specifically designed to showcase the world of learning opportunities available at Motlow—including the mysterious and often under-explained world of workforce training, credit for prior learning, stackable credentials, and aptitude assessments.

FOSTERS DISCUSSION

Motlow’s goal is to provide everyone in its service area with marketable skills. Whether a certificate, diploma, or degree, everyone should have access to life-changing learning, and this tool makes searching for opportunities simple. The Program Finder helps foster family discussions and fuels college-going aspirations.

“We all felt the integration of an interest inventory of short-term training and industry-recognized certificates was critical to the instrument we wanted to craft. Micro-credentials and modularized learning are some of the fastest ways a student, family, or incumbent worker can improve their economic situation,” said Dr. Tony Millican, executive vice president of Workforce and Community Development at Motlow. “And yet, these can be some of the most invisible opportunities to learn about. The collaboration between our workforce team at MotlowTrained and our marketing gurus in External Affairs has produced a one-of-a-kind product that will positively impact a lot of lives.”

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

The tool populates results in various ways to support viewing preferences. Users can choose list-view, where information is organized linearly, or image-view for users who prefer visual information. Two viewing options make the tool responsive to various learning styles, which is another way Motlow demonstrates its commitment to diversity and inclusion. The tool is also responsive and mobile friendly. These were accessibility features that were important to the team.

“Utilization of the Program Finder is a testimony to how essential it is to Motlow. Since we launched the tool last spring, it has consistently rated among the top five most trafficked pages on our website,” said Davis Seal, director of marketing operations at Motlow. “We’ve had employees who have worked here for years tell us that they learned new things about Motlow by using it.”

Developed in-house by Motlow’s External Affairs team, the Program Finder allows searching by career area, program type, class format (including weekends and evenings), and campus

location. Students can choose between two-year degrees designed to transfer to a four-year institution, two-year degrees that prepare them to directly enter the workforce, one-year or two-year certificates, or career credit classes for developing new skills for work or personal enrichment.

It took Motlow's External Affairs team more than a year to build the tool. It was a divide-and-conquer approach. Bryson led visioning, planning, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Shasteen led content development, and Seal led technical production.

"During our research and development phase, we looked at other search tools to inform our planning," explained Bryson. "We think this may be one of the only platforms of its kind because it integrates credit and career credit programs in a filterable format. And, we have plans to expand it to make searching for professional development easier, too."

Bryson said the inspiration for this particular approach to developing Motlow's Program Finder arose from research. Bryson holds a PhD in cognition and learning. Her research in how human motivation and language fuels perception and inspiration, and how ambiguity impacts decision-making led her to pursue a plan that used common language, integrated visuals, was accessible, was responsive, and introduced prospects to a broader variety of learning pathways.

ESSENTIAL KEYWORDS

"The development of our Program Finder was research and data informed. We wanted to find new ways to help in decision-making. We wanted to find more helpful ways to support students in making life-changing decisions," Bryson added. "We wanted more than a list-filtering tool. We wanted the College to speak the language of prospective students while introducing them to key college terms which they might not be familiar. Not every student knows what supply chain management is, so we can't just list that. We need to explain it. And we need to foster student decision-making by clearly asserting why degree programs are worth considering. So, all search results include short, scannable bites of information designed to welcome and inspire further exploration. Each of those snackable bits of content link to deeper information. We also wanted to answer simple incoming student questions, such as 'what degrees are available at my campus,' or 'what degrees are completely online?'"

Keywords are also coded into the Program Finder to serve as surrogates for academic language.

"We use our word search analytics from website visitors to determine what returned few, if any, results. For example, we observed that there are very few website keyword searches for Sports Management or Logistics, but we see lots of keyword searches for terms such as 'coaching' and 'business,'" said Seal. "We manually coded the Program Finder to return information about Sports Management and Logistics when users searched for highly related terms such as coaching and business. That is a continuing process. We keep the Program Finder relevant and

fresh by keeping a watchful eye on what our prospects are searching for. If they search for coach, we populate all things sports. If prospects search for business, we try to introduce parallel suggestions such as cybersecurity, accounting, and even entrepreneurship.”

COST-EFFECTIVE AND USER-FRIENDLY

Motlow’s marketing budget was another driving force in the tool’s development.

“I was looking for a way to stay nimble and be creative about our budget realities,” explained Bryson. “The College continues to add new pathways, degrees, programs, and services. Unfortunately, that doesn’t always mean that we get additional funding for promoting these programs. So, we developed the Program Finder in a way that will help generate traffic for all of our programs. While we can’t spend thousands of dollars promoting every program we offer, we can invest heavily in driving traffic to the Program Finder and then ensure that every program is easily findable via every possible search option.”

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INFORMED MARKETING

Bryson said that her team takes accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion very seriously.

“We want everyone to have access to every opportunity. While I would never say that access is equity, I do believe that access is an essential gateway on the path toward equity. Prospective learners deserve to know all of the options they have access to, in both college credit and career credit. Potential students need to see the diversity of programming we have so that they better understand the diversity of learning we are here to support,” she said. “Motlow is an inclusive institution. To embody that claim, we must use common language, be responsive to cognitive differences in information processing, organize information in ways that matter to those we serve, and ensure that everyone has access to all possibilities.”

Motlow’s Program Finder will continue to change and adapt as the College expands. As new programs are added, the tool will continue to be developed.

“This is not a one-and-done exercise. We didn’t create it to leave it,” said Seal. “We recently integrated interest assessment tools into the Program Finder. Now we even treat credit for prior learning as a program you can explore. The platform is continually nurtured because it informs critical decision-making. I don’t think people realize how much time and effort we put into this. We have to be vigilant in maintaining it because it has become our primary storytelling tool.”

Find out more at motlow.edu.

Tennessee’s Community Colleges is a system of 13 colleges offering a high-quality, affordable, convenient, and personal education to prepare students to achieve their educational and career goals in two years or less. The system offers associate degree and certificate programs, workforce development programs, and transfer pathways to four-year degrees. For more

information, please visit us online at tbr.edu or visit Motlow at motlow.edu.

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