



At Scale & Still Personal: How Houston City College Built a First Year Experience That Feels Like It Was Made for Every Student

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Houston City College serves approximately 100,000 students annually across a large, multi-campus urban system. Its student population is among the most diverse in American higher education: traditional-age freshmen, returning adults, dual credit students, international students, and workforce returners, with an average student age of 24-26. The First Year Experience course—Education 1300: Learning Framework—enrolls approximately 13,000 students per year and is taught by 18 full-time professors and 60 to 100 adjunct instructors depending on the semester. HPRS 1201 (Introduction to Health Professions) is a foundational, short-term online course exploring healthcare careers, medical terminology, and professional ethics for first year students.

For years, the department ran two parallel first-year experience courses with two different textbooks, serving academic and workforce students separately. The books came from different publishers, the courses had different identities, and the institution had no single framework for what every incoming student should know and be able to do. Before finding a workable solution, the department tried building a course entirely in-house and then piloting an OER-based approach—neither proved sustainable.

Working with Macmillan Learning Custom Solutions over the past six to ten years, Dr. Kimberly Koledoye and her colleagues built something that didn't exist before: a unified First Year Experience course with a custom text, localized content, institution-specific resources, and a digital engagement infrastructure designed for HCC's specific student population. Achieve handles content mastery before students walk into class, freeing instructors to focus on application, discussion, and the kind of connection that changes outcomes for first-generation and returning-adult students.

The result is a program that serves 13,000 students a year in a way that feels personal—and produces data to prove it's working.

At a Glance

Institution: Houston City College (formerly Houston Community College; renamed September 2025)

Department: Academic Student Success — Education 1300: Learning Framework At a Glance (First Year Experience)

Annual Enrollment: 100,000

Faculty: 18 full-time professors; 60–100 adjuncts per semester

Delivery: Custom e-book + Achieve, embedded in Canvas LMS; Vital Source for e-book access

Partnership Length: 6–10 years with Macmillan Custom Solutions

Faculty Lead: Dr. Kimberly Koledoye, Professor & Program Coordinator; Customization Committee Chair since ~2010–2012

Macmillan Contact: Bernardette (customization specialist)

Achieve Weight: Achieve completion = 15% of total course grade

Student Satisfaction: ~89% rate the textbook and Achieve materials positively





Background and Context

The Institution and Its Students

Houston City College is a large, multi-campus urban community college system serving one of the most economically and demographically dynamic cities in the United States. Its approximately 100,000 annual students reflect Houston's diversity directly: recent high school graduates, adults returning to education after years in the workforce, dual credit students still in high school, international students, and working professionals seeking new credentials. The average student age is 34.

That population profile creates instructional challenges that a traditional first-year experience course design doesn't fully address. A 34-year-old returning to college after a decade in the workforce has different needs, anxieties, and reference points than an 18-year-old arriving straight from high school. Houston's strong economy adds a retention challenge specific to the region: students may take a course or two, gain a credential or a skill, and return to work—leaving before completing a degree. Meeting these students where they are, giving them resources they can actually use, and connecting them to the institution quickly is the core job of the First Year Experience course.

Dr. Kimberly Koledoye & the Academic Student Success Department

Dr. Koledoye has been a full-time faculty member at Houston City College for 18 of her 20 years in higher education. She is Professor and Program Coordinator in the Academic Student Success department, which is organized around a single course: Education 1300, Learning Framework. She has chaired the department's customization committee since its inception around 2010–2012—making her one of the longest-tenured leaders of a sustained Macmillan customization partnership in this case study series.





The Challenge

Two Courses, Two Textbooks, No Unified Identity

Before the current program, Houston City College ran two separate first-year experience courses: one oriented toward academic transfer students and one toward workforce development students. The courses used different textbooks from different publishers—Harrington from Cengage on some campuses, Sheffield from Pearson on others. The department wide goal was consolidation: one course, one framework, one experience for every incoming student regardless of their educational path.

The Harrington text was well-regarded but too academic in tone and scope for workforce-track students. The Sheffield text had a different problem: Pearson's service became unreliable, and the book eventually stopped receiving revisions. Neither text could anchor a unified program. The department needed something that was accessible without being reductive, challenging without being alienating, and flexible enough to be customized for HCC's specific institutional context.

What Came Before: A History of Alternatives

What distinguishes the Houston City College story from other institutions in this series is the depth of its prior experimentation. Dr. Koledoye and her colleagues didn't arrive at Macmillan by default—they arrived after trying two other approaches and learning specific lessons from each.

The first was a fully in-house Canvas course built approximately 15 years ago, before OER was a widely understood option. The department constructed the entire course within the LMS, with no textbook dependency. It worked initially—but over time, links broke, content became outdated, and the maintenance burden became unsustainable without dedicated support staff. A self-built course is only as good as the team's capacity to keep it current.

The second was a grant-funded Lumen Learning OER pilot. The appeal was obvious: free to students for the duration of the grant. But when the grant ended, costs began rising. More significantly, the OER platform offered no customization pathway and limited LMS embedding capability. The course couldn't be made to feel like Houston City College—it was generic by design.

Both experiments clarified exactly what the department needed. Macmillan offered all three things the prior solutions couldn't: a sustainable infrastructure, genuine customization capability, and deep LMS integration. The decision to partner wasn't made lightly—it was made after learning what the alternatives actually cost.

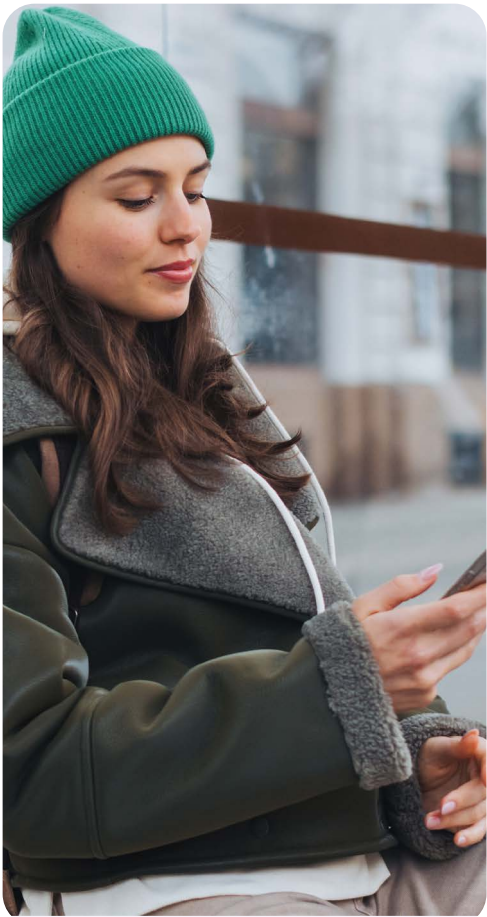


The Solution: A Multi-Layer Custom Experience

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Whether OER or publisher, what matters is sustainability, customizability and LMS integration.”

- Dr. Kimberly Koledoye



The current custom program is not a single product—it's a layered system built over years of collaboration with the Macmillan team. Each layer solves a specific problem identified through direct experience with HCC students and faculty.

Layer 1: The HCC Insider's Guide

The first and most foundational layer is a roughly 40-page institution-specific resource inserted at the front of the textbook. Modeled conceptually on a course catalog, it consolidates into one downloadable document everything a new HCC student needs to navigate the institution: contact information, campus resources, financial aid guidance, student services, and support programs.

The design intent was practical and specific. Many HCC students—particularly returning adults—are not comfortable navigating multiple institutional websites to find basic information. A single downloadable document they can save to their phone means phone numbers and resources are always accessible, even without internet connectivity. The Insider's Guide is, in effect, an orientation document for students who didn't get a traditional orientation.

The program is now expanding. Dr. Koledoye is currently working with the Macmillan team to develop a campus-wide version of the Insider's Guide that would extend beyond the Academic Student Success department to serve the institution as a whole.



Layer 2: Localized Chapter Opening Stories

The textbook's chapter-opening student stories—a standard feature of the base Macmillan text—were customized to feature HCC students. The effect is simple and direct: students reading the textbook encounter peers who look like them, attend the same institution, and are navigating recognizable challenges. Peer relatability is one of the most reliable engagement mechanisms in first-year experience course design, and it's built into every chapter.

Layer 3: A Curated Achieve Experience

Achieve's full feature set is extensive. Rather than deploying all of it, Dr. Koledoye worked with the Macmillan team to identify the specific tools HCC's course actually needed—learning curves, case studies, and embedded assessments—and build a curated experience around them. Faculty are not confronted with features they'll never use. Students encounter a focused, intentional environment rather than a sprawling platform.

Achieve completion is weighted at 15% of the total course grade—a structural decision that communicates institutional commitment to the platform and creates consistent motivation for students to engage with the pre-class content. Students are expected to complete Achieve assignments before attending class, arriving with foundational knowledge already in place.

Layer 4: The Digital Campus Scavenger Hunt

One of the most inventive elements of the HCC program is a digital scavenger hunt designed collaboratively with the Macmillan team. Students navigate a virtual version of their own campus, exploring resources and completing tasks tied to real institutional locations and services. The scavenger hunt functions as an orientation and engagement activity, lives in Canvas as a graded assignment, and uses campus-inspired building graphics developed specifically for HCC.

The result is an onboarding experience that is interactive, completable, and trackable—a meaningful upgrade over the traditional “read the syllabus” approach to introducing students to campus resources.

Layer 5: Course Navigation Videos with Embedded Accountability

Faculty-created videos walking students through course navigation were part of the program early on—but they had a measurability problem. When hosted in Canvas, there was no reliable way to confirm whether students had watched them. Students who skipped the videos arrived in class underprepared; faculty had no visibility into the gap.

The Macmillan team solved this by embedding the navigation videos in Achieve and pairing them with accompanying quizzes. Completion is now measurable, accountability is built in, and faculty have data on whether students have engaged with orientation content before the first class session.



The Process: Decision-Making and Partnership

A Rigorous Faculty Selection Process

Textbook adoption at Houston City College follows a structured, multi-stage process designed to manage the complexity of getting consensus from a large and diverse faculty. A committee of six to ten faculty members first narrows a broad field to four finalists. All 18 full-time faculty members then receive and evaluate those four textbooks using a rubric-based rating system, followed by a formal vote. The entire process takes approximately one semester.

The committee's upfront filtering is what makes full-faculty engagement workable: by the time all voices are in the room, the options are already focused. The process is rigorous without being unwieldy, and it produces genuine faculty ownership of the final selection.

What Made Macmillan the Right Partner

Dr. Koledoye's characterization of the Macmillan partnership—relative to prior publisher relationships—centers on a single word: responsiveness. Getting a change made through a previous publisher was, in her description, like an act of Congress. With Macmillan, a case study redesign that required adding questions was completed within months. When the department wanted to expand the Insider's Guide and ran past a deadline, the Macmillan team's response was essentially: we can figure it out.

The operational relationship has deepened well beyond textbook production. Macmillan representatives attend the department's annual faculty training and participate in nightly "tech hours" sessions at the start of each semester—troubleshooting support for the 60 to 100 adjunct instructors who need to get up to speed quickly. The partnership functions less like a vendor relationship and more like an extension of the department's own support infrastructure.



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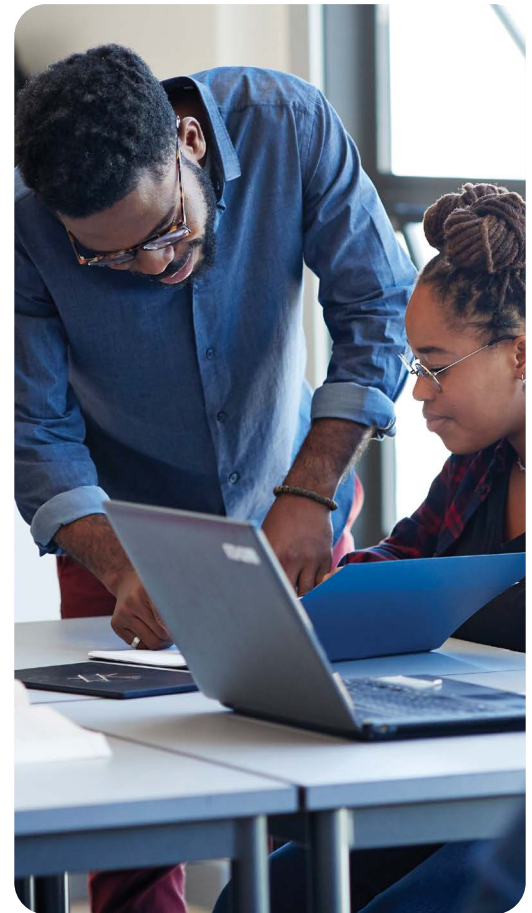
They were small enough that if we said we needed a change, they could make it happen very quickly.”

– Dr. Kimberly Koledoye

One Area for Improvement

Dr. Koledoye offered two candid pieces of constructive feedback. The first concerns team continuity: losing a long-tenured Macmillan customization contact without significant advance notice created a re-learning curve and a period of disruption. She understands the publishing industry is changing rapidly, but flagged continuity of relationships as an area where Macmillan could strengthen the partnership experience.

The second is a process suggestion: she would benefit from seeing a full project timeline upfront—all milestones and dependencies, not just the next immediate deadline. For a department managing a complex, multi-layer customization across a large faculty, visibility into the full sequence makes planning significantly easier.





Outcomes and Impact

Reclaiming the Classroom

The most consistently cited faculty benefit is also the most structural: because Achieve delivers content mastery before class, instructors are no longer responsible for transmitting foundational information during class time. They can stop teaching to the slide deck and start teaching to the student—facilitating application, discussion, and deeper engagement with material students have already encountered.

For a course serving 13,000 students annually, this shift in the instructional model is not a minor adjustment. It changes what class time is for. Instructors report feeling more confident and less pressured to cover every slide. The 60 to 100 adjunct instructors in particular benefit from a structured, pre-built content delivery system that lets them focus their energy on facilitation rather than content coverage—a direct parallel to the onboarding advantage described in the University of Tennessee case.

The Data Game Changer

The most operationally significant outcome of the Achieve integration is one that may not be immediately obvious: the elimination of a separate student learning outcome assessment process. Before Achieve, the department conducted distinct SLO assessments to measure whether students were achieving course objectives. Achieve's performance data on learning curves now provides that measurement directly, embedded in the normal flow of the course.

Student Engagement and Confidence

Student engagement with the program produces some telling signals. Approximately 89% of students rate the textbook and Achieve materials positively—either liking them “a great deal” or “somewhat”.

A qualitative signal worth noting: students have asked why they don't have this kind of integrated experience in all their courses—an unsolicited endorsement of the model. And at least one professor consistently has students who formally challenge Achieve assessment questions they believe are incorrect. Dr. Koledoye frames this not as a problem but as evidence of engagement: students who push back on content are students who are thinking critically about what they're learning.



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Achieve dashboards allow instructors to see in real time what percentage of students have engaged with content—enabling responsive, data-driven teaching adjustments.”

- Dr. Kimberly Koledoye



The practical result is a meaningful reduction in faculty hours spent on assessment administration—time that can go elsewhere. The department’s annual summer assessment review uses Achieve data to evaluate course content and assignment design, adjust emphasis where needed, and document outcomes for institutional accountability purposes. The data is more granular and more timely than what the prior assessment process produced.

Scale as the Proof Point

The numbers themselves make the case. Education 1300 enrolls 13,000 students annually. The course is taught by more than 80 instructors across multiple campuses. Every one of those students receives the same foundational framework, the same institutional resources, and the same access to campus life through the Insider’s Guide and the digital scavenger hunt. Consistency at that volume, without sacrificing the local and personal feel that makes first-year experience courses effective, is a significant achievement. It is also what Macmillan’s customization infrastructure made possible.



Lessons for Institutions Considering

The True Cost of “Free”

Houston City College’s experience with both a self-built LMS course and a grant-funded OER solution illustrates a pattern that recurs across institutions: the upfront cost of a free or inexpensive solution is rarely the total cost. Maintenance burden, lack of customization, and limited LMS integration each carry real costs—in faculty time, in student experience, and in program sustainability. Before choosing a low-cost solution, account for what you’ll spend to keep it viable.

Build in Layers, Not All at Once

The current HCC program—Insider’s Guide, localized stories, curated Achieve, scavenger hunt, embedded navigation videos—was not built in a single project. It evolved over six to ten years of ongoing collaboration. Starting with a clear base and adding layers as needs were identified and solutions developed is a more sustainable model than trying to build the complete vision at launch.

Use Achieve to Flip the Instructional Model

The most impactful pedagogical decision the department made was structural: assigning 15% of the course grade to Achieve completion and establishing an expectation that students arrive to class having already engaged with foundational content. This creates a different kind of class session—one built around application rather than transmission. For any institution concerned about passive learning and low student engagement, this model is worth examining closely.





Ask for a Full Project Timeline Upfront

Dr. Koledoye's process recommendation to other departments: request a complete milestone timeline at the start of any customization project, not just the next immediate deadline. Understanding the full sequence of dependencies—content submission, review cycles, platform integration, testing, launch—allows departments to plan realistically and avoid surprises.

Invest in Relationship Continuity

The quality of the Macmillan partnership is inseparable from the quality of the people involved. The disruption caused by losing a long-tenured contact without transition planning is a practical reminder that institutional knowledge lives in people, not just in documentation. Departments should document their customization history, the rationale behind design decisions, and the institutional context that informed those decisions—both for internal continuity and to give new contacts the foundation they need to get up to speed quickly.

About Macmillan Learning Custom Solutions

Macmillan Learning Custom Solutions partners with higher education institutions to develop course materials tailored to specific departmental needs—incorporating original content, curating existing resources, and delivering custom materials through digital platforms including Vital Source and Achieve. From individual chapter selections to fully original program-authored front matter, Custom Solutions supports the full production lifecycle: content curation and rights management, organizational design, platform integration, print and digital fulfillment, and ongoing support.

Contact Your Rep for More Information

