

Shifting **high-stakes** exam online

How Mercer | Mettl ensured a successful and seamless
online examination for Howard University amid the pandemic



About the University



HOWARD
UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1867, Howard University is a private research university comprising 13 schools and colleges in Washington, D.C, in the United States of America. Students pursue college education in more than 120 streams for undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees.

The University hosts nationally ranked programs in social work and business and communication sciences. It is equally committed to developing scholars and professionals who drive change.



[Kamala Harris](#), the current Vice-President of the United States of America, is a Howard alumnus.



Challenges and requirements in conducting the Fellowship examination

Howard University is one of the prominent engineers of social change. The University aligns its vision of academic excellence with its end-goal of offering traditional and cutting-edge fellowship programs. Each one of these exceedingly competitive programs follows a highly selective admission process, including multiple assessments, such as written exercises, followed by face-to-face interviews.

However, COVID-19 created significant disruption in all admission-related activities for the varsity and applicants, leading to the suspension of processes. There were serious concerns about the future of education, entwined with stakeholders' safety. The University administration understood it had to prepare to commence the admission process based on academic schedules. Hence, it decided to pivot to conducting its examinations in the virtual setting.

Howard University was unsure about conducting online exams for its acclaimed fellowship program owing to multiple challenges:



1. A secure platform

Howard University narrowed down its requirement to a viable platform that would allow applicants to take their written exams in an anxiety-free, safe environment. It had to guarantee the test's quality for candidates and also meet the highest security and compliance standards concerning data privacy. It was equally critical to manage the faculty's workflow by relieving them of mundane and burdensome examination-related duties, enabling them to focus on more pressing and rewarding matters. Hence, the University mandated a dynamic and secure end-to-end online examination platform that could enable it to create, administer, supervise, deliver and evaluate its high-stakes exam with ease.



2. Addressing integrity issues

Howard University strictly adheres to the goal of utmost integrity and honesty. Since academia wanted to move online with the written exam, the University could ill-afford any aberrant behavior, either through plagiarism or by accessing online resources for assistance. Thus, the University sought an online proctoring tool that validated the identity of the exam-takers and ensured overall exam integrity. Such an arrangement could deter cheating and protect the fellowship program's standards.



3. Supervision by proctors

Among the University's foremost requirements was on-boarding live proctors. Its staff was usually investing significant time proctoring individual candidates via zoom. Hence, it sought the feasibility of live proctors to monitor multiple applicants simultaneously while actively assuaging concerns in real-time. However, this feature was missing in all the technical partners that it explored.



4. Technical hurdles

The University accorded technical issues a high priority. Certain technical constraints such as internet glitches or intermittent connectivity during the examination process created a barrier to delivering a seamless online exam experience for all stakeholders.



Discovering Mercer | Mettl's offerings

Howard University scouted various vendors for its specific requirements, but no viable partner offered an all-inclusive solution. It was then that one of its colleagues (The Washington Center) - that had administered a similar program - referred its proctoring and platform partner, Mercer | Mettl, as a trustworthy resource.

After significant research, Howard University found Mercer | Mettl's solutions compelling for its fellowship exam. A successful pilot-run assured the former of the collaborative partnership, enabling it to successfully transition toward delivering the online proctored exam.



Mercer | Mettl was a perfect fit for our fellowship examination as the platform was streamlined with our needs seamlessly. It met the requirement of providing a secure space to the test-takers, giving us the option to use browsing tolerance. It provided the advantage of adding live human proctors, which wasn't available on any other platform.



Ms. Lily López-McGee

National Fellowship Director
Howard University

Solution

Mercer | Mettl EXAMIN- The online proctoring and examination system

Mercer | Mettl's team quickly comprehended Howard University's challenges. It knew that only a sophisticated technology tailored to its needs would satiate it. Hence, Mercer | Mettl's futuristic online solution- the online proctoring and examination system – was advocated to mitigate the University's multiple challenges in giving online exams.

Here's how Mercer| Mettl solved Howard University's significant challenges:

The team employed Mercer | Mettl EXAMIN, a proficient and end-to-end online examination system. The comprehensive end-to-end exam management platform was easy-to-use and enabled the faculty to create and host its exams in a secure, seamless and user-friendly environment. The platform was integrated with a proctoring feature for live proctors to supervise flexibly, dramatically altering the test experience while offering the faculty a dedicated admin dashboard for detailed analytics and logs to ensure reliable remote exam invigilation.

Here are some more details about the platform and its benefits to the University and its applicants:

Exam setting

- Mercer | Mettl's team offered the University a rich repository of 26 different formats for its written examination. It meant the faculty could upload their exam papers in any desired format.
- The flexibility also accommodated a range of other parameters required by academicians.
- Continual technical support enabled the faculty to schedule glitch-free exams at any given time.

Live proctoring feasibility

- The University wanted professional proctors to validate the test-takers and their submissions to avoid integrity-related issues. Hence, with one-to-one and one-to-many proctoring view available on Mercer | Mettl, professionally trained live proctors could monitor applicants remotely, from start to finish and validate their submissions.
- They even had an added feature of pausing /stopping /resuming the exam in real-time, along with a live chat option, to interact with the test-takers as desired.
- The entire test session was recorded. Therefore, the designated proctors could revisit the recordings as needed to check for any anomaly.

Secure browsing tolerance

- Mercer | Mettl's limited navigation control feature was another advanced anti-cheating solution that boosted the varsity's confidence in securing its exams, ensuring a highly secure and controlled online environment.
- Mettl Secure Browser (MSB) locked the applicants' test screens and prevented them from opening new browser tabs/incognito tabs/windows. It blocked functions such as copying/pasting and restricted shortcut keys and finger swipes.
- It also prevented access to secondary devices, such as cables, hard drives or external devices such as the USB or internet dongle, during the exam. If applicants synchronized any such device before the test or attempted to synchronize them during the test, the MSB would not let the test commence and immediately log out the applicant.
- It did not allow exam-takers to move out of the application before finishing the test.

AI-powered, anti-cheating solution

- Human supervision is best accentuated with technology. Hence, Mercer | Mettl's AI-assisted human proctors ensured a safe environment with similar accountability levels as in-person invigilation during Howard University's remote proctoring drive.
- Mercer | Mettl's futuristic AI algorithm trained with more than 2.8 million proctored assessments efficiently detected up to 18 dynamic digressions during the exam. With over 95% accuracy, the intelligent algorithm helped human proctors flag various suspicious cases, such as the non-visibility of face/ presence, detection of mobile phone, the presence of an additional person, distracted movements, etc.

Easy to use

- Mercer | Mettl's platform was user-friendly, easy to navigate and catered to all levels of technical literacy.
- It replicated and created a real-life exam experience to retain the traditional look and feel of a written exam with no change in the experience for exam-takers.

Internet bandwidth

- Mercer | Mettl's low internet bandwidth fortified the test-taking experience for applicants across the globe.
- With seamless functionality at speed as low as 512kbps, applicants for whom high-speed internet connectivity was a barrier had a consistent, equally reliable and secure testing experience.
- A user-friendly process did not demand applicants' time for downloading software packages and tutorials. It ran seamlessly on the applicants' systems, irrespective of their location.

Reporting metrics

- The platform's instantaneous report generation feature was incredibly efficient at saving significant staff hours that were otherwise spent undertaking paper evaluation.
- Aside from precise evaluation, the reporting tool gave the faculty access to intricate, relevant and accurate data, helping determine applicants' potential.

Adherence to security norms

- Mercer | Mettl's focus on stringent cybersecurity protocols addressed the University's concern regarding the data breach, unauthorized access, and privacy at every stage of the examination process.



Data security

Mercer | Mettl's host, Amazon Web Services (AWS), proved to be a highly secure cloud-based platform for storage and computation.



Data encryption in transit and at rest

HTTPS (256-bit SSL encryption) ensured secure data transmission and that webcam proctored tests ran without downloading the software. Similarly, an uncompromised maximum security storage environment was created for applicants' personal data, questions and exam results.



Access rights management

Mercer | Mettl's team ensured the available data's safety and encryption by defining clear access rights, log reports and audit trails of various system resources.

- Multi-factor authentication added an extra level of security by allowing only authorized users to log into the mechanism.
- Mercer | Mettl validation included GDPR compliance and ISO 27001:2013 certification.



Discovering Mercer | Mettl's offerings

Vice President Kamala Harris has often spoken about the importance of teaching with truth and integrity. Howard University's pledge to maintain that integrity fructified with Mercer | Mettl's suite of online proctoring solutions.

It was able to seamlessly host its National Competitive Fellowship Award program without challenges and concerns, maintaining its reputation as a center of high learning.

Another undeniable advantage of utilizing Mercer | Mettl's solutions was the sheer time saved by the faculty, initially around 40 hours. Those creating the exam also found the system extremely easy to use. There were no reports of delivery problems, internet issues, or slowdowns, ensuring smooth and end-to-end delivery of exams for all. The online platform's compliance with limited internet feasibility enabled a comprehensively wider reach.

The system's technical capacity seemed to astound the faculty as it churned a large volume of real-time data into valuable insights available for instantaneous action. It was timely, meaningful and actionable.



Despite the short timeframe, Mercer | Mettl replicated a testing center's security, efficiency, and efficacy within the University's allocated budget.

The way forward

Even though Howard University approached online remote proctoring as a short-term solution, the resources offered by Mercer | Mettl opened it to an efficient, effective, flexible and secure means of conducting assessment and examination. It has already begun using the platform to test some of the positions for which it is hiring. It also plans to use the solution for other purposes, such as professional development for the fellows. Howard University believes this partnership will offer a centralized solution for all its assessment and examination needs while opening up new possibilities that will grow exponentially.

About us

At Mercer | Mettl, our mission is to enable organizations to make better people decisions across two key areas: acquisition and development. Since our inception in 2010, we have partnered with more than 4,000 corporates, 31 sector skills councils/government departments and 15+ educational institutions across more than 90 countries.

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