Redesigning Higher Ed to Support New Majority Learners’ Engagement

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In Conversation:

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Reflection: Quotes + Shared Experiences from New Majority Learners
“I am a full-time student, I work full time, and I’m a full-time mom. It's hard to balance everything.”
“[The pandemic has] made everything so much harder. From getting laid off twice from two different jobs, not being able to pay my bills, it put me in even more debt as a college student.”
“When I went back to school the second time, I was living in a homeless shelter with my kids. There was a lot of emotional turmoil and things that I had to work on that were not directly related to school, but it affected my schooling. I just felt like I was alone.”
“[Five years from now] I want a home to call my own with some land my kids can play safely on and create memories. I want to have a garden to show them how to grow their own food like my parents did. I want to be able to afford to go on vacations with my kids. Above all I crave financial stability.”
“My son and I had a plan to start our own business, but he died in October, so I am trying to figure out a new plan. I would like to have my own home and a good job. I would like to find a job where I can help people who deserve a home of their own that don’t know where to start.”
“Having my daughter motivated me. I just wanted to provide for her and to work towards self-fulfillment. **I wanted to have a job where I can be happy** and feel happy every day.”
College was never designed for the success of these new majority learners, and often designed to purposefully keep them out.

Who are new majority learners?

- learners of color, specifically Black, indigenous, or Latinx
- learners who speak English as a second language (are ESL learners)
- learners who are immigrants to the US, or children of immigrant caregivers
- learners who are undocumented
- learners who are low income, living in poverty, or experiencing basic needs (housing, food) insecurity
- learners who have enrolled in a higher ed program at 22-years +
- learners who live with a disability or are neurodivergent
- learners who are the first one in their family to attend a college or university
- learners who do not have a high school diploma
- learners who can only attend college part-time (due to life, financial circumstances)
- learners who work part- or full-time
- transfer students
- learners who are financially independent for financial aid purposes
- learners who have dependents other than a partner/spouse
- learners who are veterans or active duty members
- learners who are transgender, genderqueer, or gender nonbinary
Learner-centered design has never been more crucial.

To build a more equitable future, we must design education systems that support new majority learners’ engagement in their learning.
Learner Engagement
What is it + why does it matter?

Learner engagement can be thought of in terms of learners’ behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. It predicts persistence, completion, goal attainment, student satisfaction, career outcomes.

No learner is inherently engaged or disengaged. The way that our environments support or frustrate our key drivers of engagement informs the kind of engagement we experience.
Self-Determination Theory:
Three Drivers of Engagement

- **Growth**: The learning environment must help learners see how they are growing, show them they are capable of success, and help them progress toward their goals.

- **Belonging**: The learner must feel a sense of belonging, connection to, and support from their learning community in being their authentic self.

- **Agency**: The learner must feel like they’re in the driver’s seat, with opportunities to make meaningful choices about their learning experience; their learning environment needs to align with their individual goals, values, and interests.
Utilizing the Learner Engagement Framework

This framework can serve as a lens through which to understand the experiences of learners and glean actionable insights about how to design with and for them to close equity and opportunity gaps.
Supporting a Learner’s Sense of Growth

To experience a sense of growth, learners need to feel like they are capable of success in their learning environments and that they’re making progress toward their individual, big-picture goals.
“I definitely worry about if my degree will help my career. Like what if I’ve put in all this time and money and my business doesn’t take off?”

“I don’t know what my bigger picture goals for school and my career are. I’m stuck at trying to figure that out.”

“Last week I needed a little assistance. I was able to come get some eggs and different food products [from the school food pantry], and it helped keep my family alive.”
Strategies to Support New Majority Learners’ Sense of Growth

The learning environment must help learners see how they are growing, show them they are capable of success, and help them progress toward their goals.

→ Start with streamlining support to address basic needs insecurities

→ Shift to competency-based education to focus on progress rather than performance

→ Provide opportunities to directly combine work + learning
Supporting a Learner’s Sense of Belonging

Learners must feel a sense of belonging in their learning environments in order to experience high-quality engagement. They need to feel at home in their learning communities, deeply supported in their relationships, and embraced for their authentic, diverse identities.
“I didn't really know of any of the services offered at my college. I didn't make any connections and I just felt like it was just me in this big campus. I had no idea who anybody was, and that made it easier for me to drop out of classes and stop coming to school.”

“I was a high school dropout. I didn't think that I'd even go to college because it just wasn't who I was. I felt like I'm not smart enough.”

“I've met a lot of students who are also parents which feels good because you know that you're not alone. I think if they're doing it, I can keep doing it. I wish that I would have met them sooner or had more of a way to connect with other single mothers.”
Strategies to Support New Majority Learners’ Sense of Belonging

Learners must feel a sense of belonging, connection to, and support from their learning communities in being their authentic selves.

➔ Work to build an inclusive + antiracist culture
➔ Embed space for relationship building between learners and peers, mentors, staff, faculty
➔ Offer learners opportunities to both receive support from + contribute to their communities
Supporting a Learner’s Sense of Agency

Learners need to feel a sense of agency to feel supported and guided in authoring their own learning journeys. To foster deep, sustained engagement, institutions should align programs to learners’ goals, values, and priorities and provide them with meaningful choices about their educational experiences.
“I feel confident. I do, because now that I've made a career change in my education with going from nursing to business, it all makes sense. I'm still helping people, so I'm living within my purpose. I feel really good because I can see my future now as I couldn't see it before.”

“I can’t work right now because my school schedule won’t allow me to. So it’s hard because if I put my daughter in daycare, I won’t be able to go to school because I can’t pay for it, so I’ll have to go to work. But the whole point of me putting her in daycare was so I can go to school.”
Strategies to Support New Majority Learners’ Sense of Agency

Learners must feel like they’re in the driver’s seat, with opportunities to make meaningful choices about their learning experiences; their learning environments need to align with their individual goals, values, and interests.

➔ Personalize visible paths that validate learners’ prior experience

➔ Give learners choice: time, pace, and place of learning

➔ Build efficient, industry-aligned pathways that incorporate 21st century skills micro-credentials
To design learning environments that support growth, agency, and belonging, we must first work to understand the experiences, identities, hopes/goals, and interests of the learners and potential learners in our communities today.
22% fewer students enrolled in 2021 – 30% from low-income high schools

42% of jobs lost during the pandemic may disappear forever

Redesign of higher ed with new majority learners to support their growth, agency, and belonging must happen now.
Download the Lab’s Actionable Learner Engagement Framework + watch the discussion at
eddesignlab.org/learnerengagementframework

#EngagingLearners
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