

Community College Growth Engine Fund

**Micro-pathways:
A Gateway to Community
College Transformation**



About the Lab and The Community College Growth Engine Fund

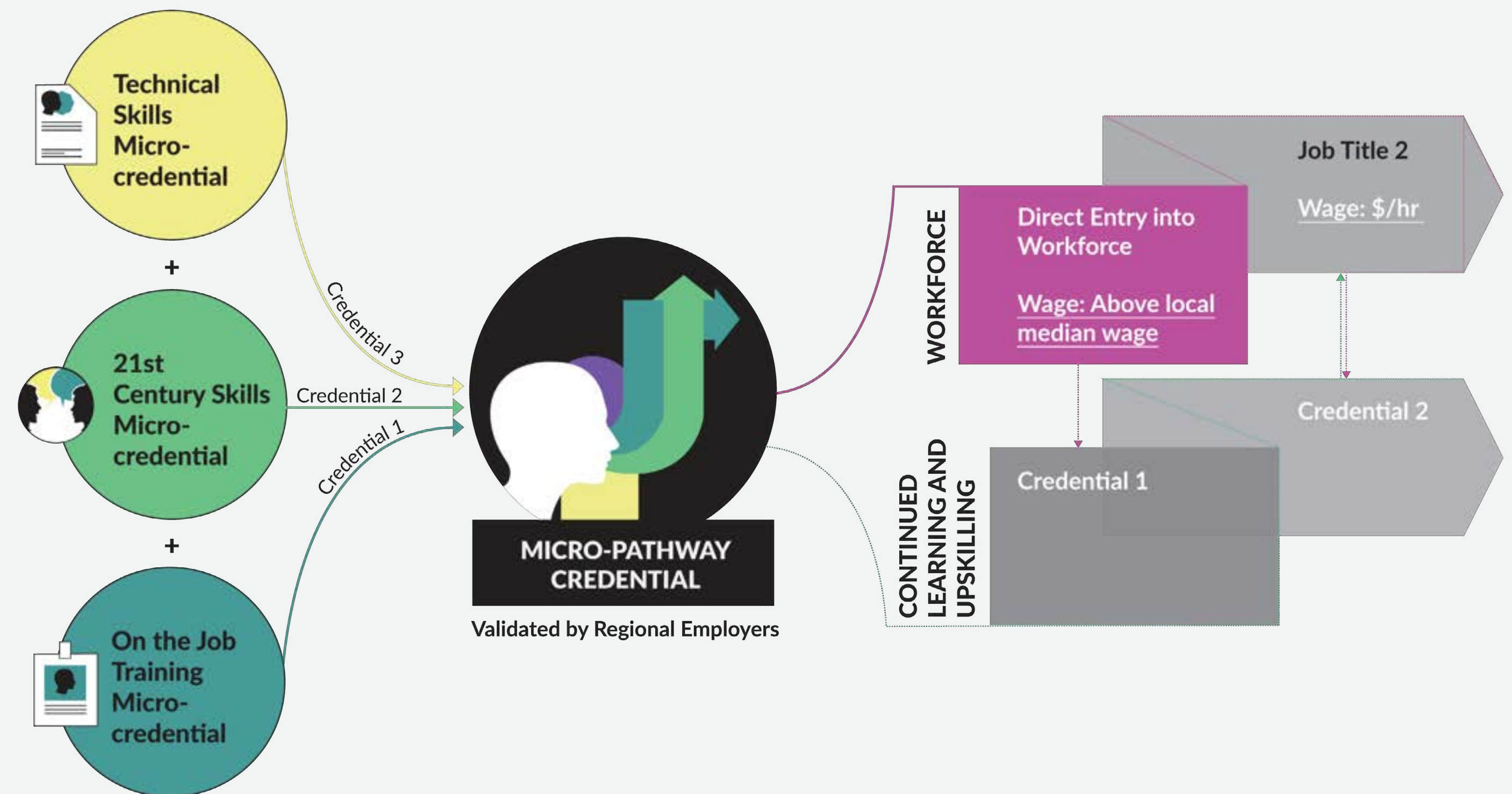
The Education Design Lab (Lab) is a national nonprofit that co-designs, prototypes, and tests education-to-workforce models through a human-centered design process focused on understanding learners' experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education, and connecting learners to economic mobility. The Lab launched the Community College Growth Engine Fund (CCGEF or the Fund, for short) – a design accelerator to work with community colleges and systems across the country to co-create a new class of credentials: micro-pathways to better meet the needs of [new majority learners](#).

Micro-pathways align to a set of [design criteria](#) informed by best practices in the field and driven by years of Lab design work with community colleges and over 8,000 interviews with new majority learners and 200-plus employers.

[The result—Cohort 1 developed 30 micro-pathways from October 2020 to December 2021 available for viewing in the CCGEF Micro-pathway Repository.](#) The remainder of this summary provides readers with the insights gathered during the design year.

Micro-pathways Explained

Co-designed with learners and employers, [micro-pathways are defined as two or more stackable credentials, including a 21st century skill micro-credential, that are flexibly delivered to be achieved within less than a year and result in a job at or above the local median wage.](#)



Design Insights about Shifting Learner Attitudes + Needs

#1 Learners need practical pathways with a clear return on investment (ROI).

Learners need high-level details about the program to understand the total cost of pathways, in both time and money, as well as the value to be gained.

#2 Learners need flexible micro-pathways that meet them where they are in their journey.

Learners need flexibility in format and timing as well as recognition of their life and work experiences.

#3 Learners want and need deeper and more extensive work-based learning.

Learners want immersive experiences in the career field they are studying so they can establish contacts and begin to build a professional network.



Design Insights about Evolving **Employer** Needs + Mindsets

#1 Employers need learners to have work-based learning experiences.

Employers seek applicants who have work-based experiences whether it's an internship, a job, volunteering, or a personal project they've built on their own.

#2 Employers see the micro-pathway co-design process as transformative to deepening their relationships with community colleges.

CCGEF's model helps colleges transform employer relationships to those of a co-designer where they are able to provide input on an ongoing basis.

#3 Employers strongly value training and credentialing for 21st century skills like communication, critical thinking and intercultural fluency.

Employer partners appreciated the strong 21st century skills focus in the micro-pathways they reviewed.



Design Insights about Transforming Community Colleges

#1 The micro-pathway design process can serve as a gateway to institutional transformation.

College leaders are using micro-pathways as a testing bed to solve numerous challenges, including the growing gulf between noncredit and credit-bearing courses.

#2 Colleges used their micro-pathways to further collaborate with other mission-aligned regional ecosystem initiatives.

The design process has helped community colleges advance other workforce and system-level strategic initiatives.

#3 Facilitated design processes with targeted tools and customized support are critical to accelerated design work.

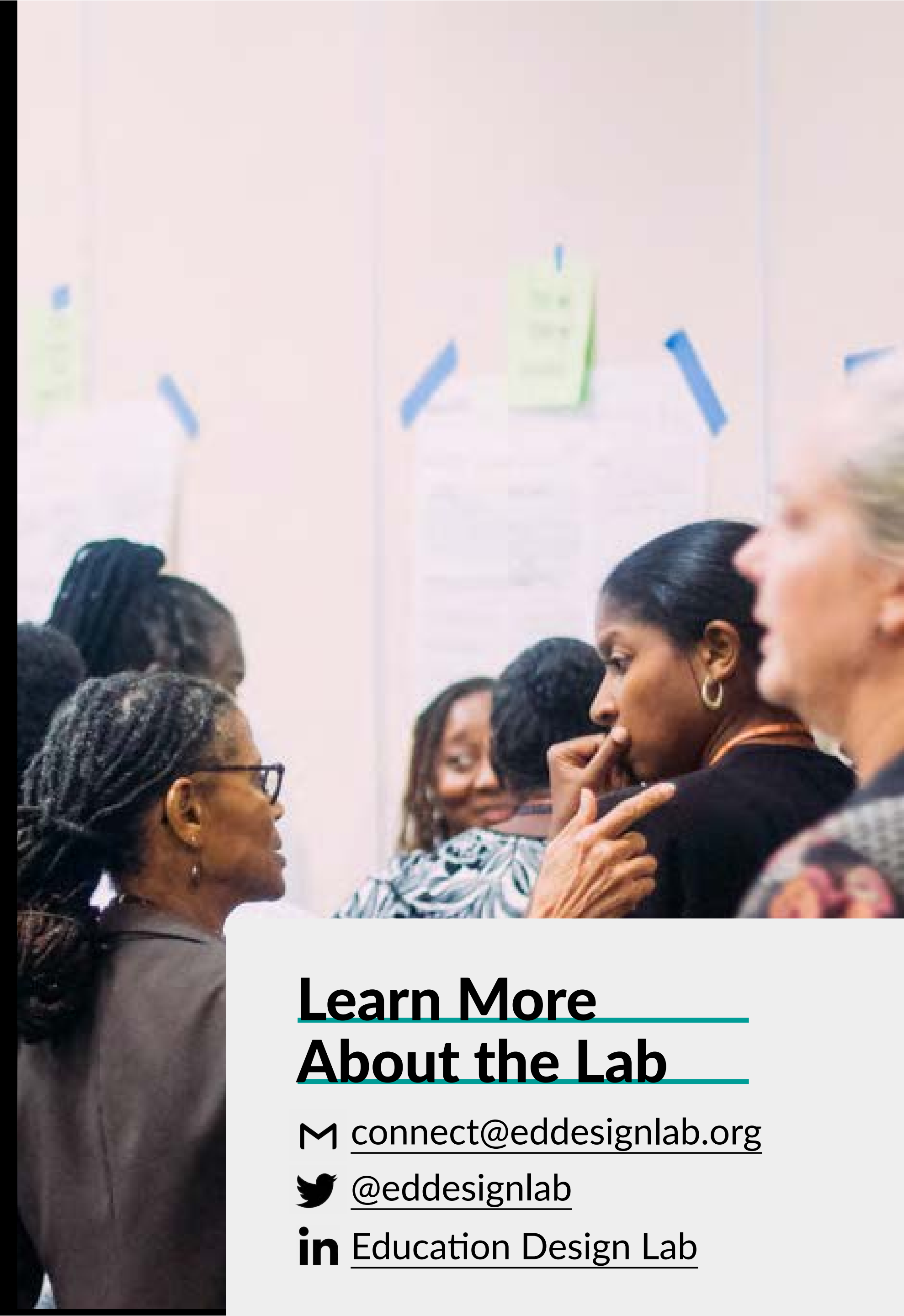
College leaders and employers found value in the Lab's "pressure tests," T-Profile, and [Learner Engagement Framework](#), which will help strengthen future initiatives and decisions.

#4 The colleges demonstrated the ability to innovate with limited resources.

While additional capacity would have enabled the colleges to expand even further, they made the most of the resources despite the challenges of designing micro-pathways during a pandemic.

#5 Champions of this work must ensure buy-in from college leadership.

While the need for strong leadership is not a new requirement for transformation, the micro-pathway design process involves nearly every department across the institution.



Learn More About the Lab

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 [Education Design Lab](https://www.linkedin.com/company/education-design-lab)