A New Role for Higher Education
An Actionable Framework to Drive Regional Ecosystem Alignment

For more information and resources to get started, visit eddesignlab.org/ecosystemsframework

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Editor’s Note

We are pleased to present this collaborative work which was developed in partnerships with 11 of the nation’s innovative higher education leaders, the inaugural cohort of the Lab’s Designers in Residence.

This work represents the collective voice of these higher education leaders representing a range of geographic ecosystems and institutional drivers. What brings these leaders together is an imperative to adapt to best serve the widely diverse populations of people failed by the U.S. higher ed system, which we at the Lab refer to as new majority learners. From its founding, the Lab has sought to co-design and facilitate with "intrapreneurs," those innovators inside traditional higher education institutions, pushing the boundaries of program design, employer and community collaboration, and harnessing new technology all on behalf of equitable opportunities for all types of learners.

This work helps colleges think about their role in the emerging learning and hiring ecosystem, and offers tangible resources to support leaders in identifying and prioritizing next steps to operationalize this role.

As the education and employment landscape evolves, we are moving to a world where the needs of learners and earners merge. In fact, we coin the phrase (l)earners to represent them as one constituency to design for and with as outlined in our latest white paper on Skills Visibility. We encourage all ecosystem leaders to consider the motivations and drivers of most new majority learners as workers looking for shorter stacks of learning to weave around and through work experience. It is the role of all learning providers to work collaboratively across ecosystem partners to capture and credential skills mastery wherever it happens and to become talent agents support (l)earners in navigating seamless transitions through work and learning. Meeting the needs of (l)earners requires a new level of collaboration across stakeholders inclusive of colleges, employers, as well as community organizations, state and local agencies and technology providers. Our visionary Designers in Residence offer an actionable framework and roadmap for institutional leaders who seek to develop the transformative partnerships that result in a high quality, accessible talent marketplace for (l)earners.
In today’s rapidly changing economy, stakeholders ranging from higher education institutions, community-based organizations, policymakers, workforce development programs, and employers are each faced with the complex challenge of evolving existing approaches to meet the changing needs of workers and learners.

Higher education institutions need new ways to increase student enrollment and engagement. Employers are seeking new solutions and partnerships to hire and retain skilled talent. Policy makers feel pressure to scale opportunity, and community-based organizations are striving to ensure that all individuals have the resources they need to succeed. Each of these stakeholders has an active role in shaping an ever-changing regional economy that enables both individuals and systems to flourish.

As demands increase for accelerated transitions between work and learning, higher education in the U.S has become increasingly siloed from key ecosystem partners such as workforce training, economic development, employers, and technological innovators. The result is a fractured learn-to-work experience for most, leaving the new majority of learners with limited access to economic opportunities.

However, as the education and employment landscape continues to adapt to advanced technologies and the impacts of the global pandemic, it is no longer possible to work in isolation. In fact, it is both obstructive and harmful—perpetuating gaps in wealth, access, opportunity, and outcome.

Designing for a truly equitable future requires working collaboratively in new ways.
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Section 1

Designing Ecosystems for Economic Mobility
It is imperative that higher education institutions and their leaders innovate and adapt to more effectively partner across regional ecosystems.

**Higher education’s alignment within a regional ecosystem is a call for partnerships that are collaborative and proactive and driven by a shared vision of economic mobility for all.**
In 2021, the Education Design Lab—the Lab, for short—assembled a cohort of 11 higher education leaders as Designers in Residence brought together to tackle this critical question:

How might higher education strengthen and evolve to better drive regional ecosystem alignment?

As a result of a 10-month collaborative design process, the Lab’s Designers in Residence have identified three levers for change that higher education leaders can implement, alongside critical tools to get started, to align regional ecosystems and drive transformation rooted in economic mobility for all.

These levers, building a resilient infrastructure, leveraging influence, and incentivizing innovations are actions that when implemented enable clear pathways for learners to reach their goals and economies to thrive.

The Designers in Residence are higher education decision-makers who represent a range of institutions from across the United States, including two-and four-year colleges, HBCUs, public and private institutions. Each Designer represents a unique regional ecosystem ranging in geographies from urban, suburban, rural, or a global online community. With this array of perspectives, Designers set out to have a collective national voice committed to adapting leadership to drive stakeholder collaboration and ecosystem alignment that centers the needs of learners and workers as they navigate the changing landscape of education and work.

The Lab’s Designers in Residence:

Adrian K. Haugabrook, Southern New Hampshire University
Ahmad Ezzeddinne, Wayne State University
Bonita Brown, Northern Kentucky University
Cameron McCoy, Shenandoah University
Chanel Fort, Stillman College
Ian Roark, Pima Community College
Jairo McMican, Central Carolina Community College
Michael Baston, Rockland Community College
Nicole McDonald, University of Houston
Rose Rojas, Maricopa Community Colleges
Stacy Townsley, Ivy Tech Community College

These levers, building a resilient infrastructure, leveraging influence, and incentivizing innovations are actions that when implemented enable clear pathways for learners to reach their goals and economies to thrive.
Section 2

Understanding Regional Education and Workforce Development Ecosystems
Regional Ecosystems:

*Regional ecosystems* are made up of a series of relationships, networks, and stakeholders connected by a common geography, shared identity, or collective goal. We use the term ecosystem to imply that there are multiple interconnected and often evolving relationships, dependencies, and connection points across stakeholders.

To drive change within a regional ecosystem, it is first essential to understand existing partnerships, the nature of relationships that exist, and voices that are not currently active in regional efforts for economic mobility.

In our work, we are most focused on understanding the effects of relationships, or lack thereof, within regional education and workforce ecosystems on learners and workers and their families.
No two regional ecosystems are alike, and partnerships adapt constantly. That’s why we worked with the Lab’s Designers in Residence to individually map their regional ecosystem by identifying the systems level partners, motivations for partnerships, and aspirations for change across an ecosystem.

This process allowed us to collect essential data to inform our understanding of the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and gaps we seek to fill by improved ecosystem alignment. **The ecosystem mapping process resulted in a critical finding:**

**Partnerships that are strongest are not connected merely by regional geography. Rather, the strongest ecosystem partnerships are those that are connected by a shared vision, collective goal, and transcend a time-bound contract.**

**Partnerships rooted in a shared vision enable proactive rather than reactive planning, and are more likely to outlast leadership transitions, staff turnover, and short-term funding.**
The Current Ecosystem

PART 1

By visually mapping existing and aspirational relationships across 11 ecosystems, the Designers identified the following common themes across higher education's role within a regional ecosystem.

These themes represent a subset of higher education ecosystems, but include perspectives from two-year colleges, four-year universities, HBCUs, public, and private institutions.

Key Ecosystem Partners are Siloed

Internal institutional relationships influence external partnerships

Institutional leaders are likely to have core and defined relationships internally: including, but not limited to, the institution’s boards, governance, and other college departments. These internal relationships influence external partnerships (e.g., who an institution does or does not collaborate with and how), as opposed to partnerships being driven by shared goals and values.

Higher ed strives to partner directly with employers, particularly global employers

Higher education partners are likely to have existing relationships with regional Chambers of Commerce or employer intermediaries. Higher education strives to strengthen relationships with global employers.

Data systems are not aligned

Data is not shared effectively and consistently across ecosystem partners. Incomplete data informs program design resulting in programs often misaligned to the needs and success of learners and workers.

Support for populations subjected to marginalization is provided by transactional relationships

Population-specific services serving populations subjected to marginalization (Black, indigenous, and communities of color, re-entry communities, opportunity youth, etc.) exist as transactional direct partnerships with community organizations.

Funding is time-bound and competitive

Funding across partners is transactional and program-specific, and efforts are often time-bound and duplicative.

Learner Experience is Inaccessible, Fractured, and Misaligned with Their Goals

PART 1
### The Current Ecosystem

#### PART 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Ecosystem Partners are Siloed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partnerships are driven by a “What’s in it for me” mindset</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional partnerships are driven by a “what’s in it for my organization” mindset. Partnerships are established to meet the immediate needs of the organization, rather than the long-term, evolving needs of a learner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>There is no clear value proposition to collaborate</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A clear business proposition is understood by some members of the ecosystem, but not all, leading to confusion and mindset barriers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with policymakers, if they exist, are transactional</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnerships with state policymakers result in transactional or reactive funding to meet a current need or crisis. Regional ecosystems aspire to strengthen partnerships with policymakers and philanthropic leaders at the national level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Innovation is not supported and is misunderstood</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation, and the aligned practices that enable higher education to adapt to evolving ecosystems needs, is poorly funded. It is not embedded across all roles and functions, nor is it considered accessible, relevant, and feasible to stakeholders across the regional ecosystem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Higher ed is unlikely to partner with emerging technologies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education partners are most likely to have core and defined partnerships with K12 partners, but are unlikely to partner actively with emerging education technology or nontraditional education providers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Learner Experience is Inaccessible, Fractured, and Misaligned with Their Goals
Section 3

Elements of the Future State
By understanding the current state of ecosystems, higher education leaders were able to review data in order to better understand where gaps in relationships lie and where higher education leaders can better drive alignment across partners.

While motivations to align ecosystems may vary across stakeholders, geographies, and perspectives, the consistent reality for the Designers in Residence is that higher education can not operate in isolation.
Elements of a Future State

What we share here is the start of a collective vision for a future state driven by 11 leaders from colleges and universities across the country. Each element highlights an essential component of an aligned ecosystem where partners are rooted in a shared vision and learners (all of us!) have clear pathways to reach their goals on their own terms.

Centered in this vision of the future state are new majority learners, or learners that college was never designed to help succeed. Who these learners are differs by institution and by region. Yet, nationally, we know that people who are Black, brown, working class, and living in poverty receive the brunt of this failing. The outlined future state strives to best serve new majority learners as they navigate the work and learning ecosystem.

What is your regional ecosystem prioritizing? Where do you want to see your ecosystem grow?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRENT STATE</th>
<th>FUTURE STATE</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key Ecosystem Partners are Siloed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ecosystem Partnerships Rooted in Shared Vision</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal relationships influence external partnerships</td>
<td>Institutions identify as a catalyst for regional economic opportunity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher ed strives to partner directly with employers</td>
<td>Higher ed is willing to accelerate internal change to meet the needs of industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data systems are not aligned</td>
<td>Data systems are shared and democratized</td>
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<td>Funding is time-bound and competitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for populations subjected to marginalization is transactional</td>
<td>Ecosystems share an understanding of equity and engage communities as co-creators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnerships are driven by a “What’s in it for me” mindset</td>
<td>Partnerships are collaborative and center the needs of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no clear value proposition to collaborate</td>
<td>Partners share a clear, documented value proposition to collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with policy, if they exist, are transactional</td>
<td>Ecosystems collectively inform policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation is not supported and is misunderstood</td>
<td>Long-term investments are made to cultivate a culture of innovation</td>
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<td>Higher ed partnerships create opportunities for lifelong learning</td>
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<td><strong>Learner Experience is Inaccessible, Fractured, and Misaligned with Their Goals</strong></td>
<td><strong>Learners Have Clear Pathways to Reach Their Goals</strong></td>
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Section 4

Pulling the Levers of Regional Transformation: The Future Leadership Role of Higher Education
As the demands on higher education leaders increase, so do proactive efforts to drive towards this future state.

What follows are three actionable commitments that higher ed leaders can take ecosystem alignment and proactively lead partners towards a future state that benefits us all.

To remain viable and relevant to learners and communities, and continue operating as an institution, higher education must:

- **Build resilient internal infrastructure**
- **Leverage influence and resources**
- **Invest in and incentivize collaborative, innovative practices**

We view these actionable commitments as levers of change.
Three Levers of Change

By activating these three levers, higher education institutions can move us from the current and fractured reality to a collective, person-centered future.

On the next few pages, we deep dive into each levers' role in actualizing this future state. 

Or, jump ahead to resources that can help you get started.

Key Ecosystem Partners are Siloed

- Internal relationships influence external partnerships
- Higher ed strives to partner directly with employers
- Data systems are not aligned
- Funding is time-bound and competitive
- Support for populations subjected to marginalization is transactional
- Partnerships are driven by a "What’s in it for me" mindset
- There is no clear value proposition to collaborate
- Relationships with policy, if they exist, are transactional
- Innovation is not supported and is misunderstood
- Higher ed is unlikely to partner with emerging technologies

Learner Experience is Inaccessible, Fractured, and Misaligned with Their Goals

If we...

Build a Resilient Infrastructure

- Institutions identify as a catalyst for regional economic opportunity
- Higher ed is willing to accelerate internal change to meet the needs of industry
- Data systems are shared and democratized
- Funding is long-term and awarded for outcomes and shared metrics
- Ecosystems share an understanding of equity and engage communities as co-creators
- Partnerships are collaborative and center the needs of learners
- Partners share a clear, documented value proposition to collaborate
- Ecosystems collectively inform policy
- Long-term investments are made to cultivate a culture of innovation
- Higher ed partnerships create opportunities for lifelong learning

Leverage Institutional Influence

Invest in and Incentivize Innovation

Learners Have Clear Pathways to Reach Their Goals
To Drive Regional Ecosystem Alignment, Higher Education Leaders Must:

Build an internal infrastructure that is resilient to change and ensures that staffing, data, and funding are aligned to support regional efforts for economic advancement.

Identity is core to an institution’s role in a regional ecosystem. Institutions must strive to be aligned internally with a commitment to regional economic advancement and a mission grounded in a deep understanding of the needs and goals of their community members. Commitments must be public and understood across roles, embedded into staffing structure and technology, and inform institutional actions and partnerships. Leaders must disincentivize replication of practices that are not aligned with regional priorities and partners. Practices and innovations are made iterative rather than static. Internal systems, including organization structure and systems of communication, adapt to create relationships with partners that are lifelong, and enable learners to easily navigate within an ecosystem depending on each person’s current needs, motivations, and goals.
Ecosystem alignment requires leaders to craft and perpetuate a shared vision that appeals to the hearts and minds of all ecosystem stakeholders. Higher education institutions must leverage their influence, including financial resources, convening power, and historic context within a community to better connect partners and measure outcomes. Leaders must communicate an active readiness to partner with new stakeholders and follow through with the narrative they set forth. Leaders must accelerate internal changes necessary to meet the needs and goals of their regional communities, even if it requires a shift in power or strategy.

**Leverage institutional influence to drive a narrative focused on economic mobility for today’s learners, and advocate for favorable policy changes at the local, state, federal, and philanthropic levels.**

To Drive Regional Ecosystem Alignment, Higher Education Leaders Must:

1. **Leverage institutional influence to drive a narrative focused on economic mobility for today’s learners, and advocate for favorable policy changes at the local, state, federal, and philanthropic levels.**
2. Ecosystems share an understanding of equity and engage communities as co-creators.
3. Partners share a clear, documented value proposition to collaborate.
4. Partnerships are collaborative and center the needs of learners.
5. Ecosystems collectively inform policy.
6. Ecosystems collectively inform policy.

Leverage institutional influence to create a future where economic mobility is achievable and policy changes are enacted at all levels.
Innovation requires learning, training, and equitable access to the process. And, a shared understanding of what it means to be innovative must exist. However, innovation is imperative to adapt to the evolving needs of workers and learners. Higher education leaders must enable innovative practices across partnerships by ensuring consistent and long-term investments are made to institutionalize a culture of innovation. These investments, including resources, training, and funding, must be made readily available to partners, staff, faculty, and the communities they serve. Innovation must be written into roles and responsibilities, and strategies such as physical space, paid professional time, and funded micro-experiments are used to remove barriers and normalize innovation and change.

**Invest in and incentivize innovation to implement strategies that respond to the needs of new majority learners, the skills-based economy, and industry.**

To Drive Regional Ecosystem Alignment, Higher Education Leaders Must:

- Invest in and incentivize innovation to implement strategies that respond to the needs of new majority learners, the skills-based economy, and industry.

Elements of Future State
How Higher Education Can Build a Future with Clear Pathways For Us All

By building a resilient infrastructure, colleges must first root their identity in clear values and economic mobility, and focus on long-term funding and democratized data.

By leveraging institutional influence, colleges must drive their regional partners to collectively center and engage local communities as co-creators, document a value proposition for collaboration, and inform policy.

By investing in and incentivizing innovation, colleges must create lasting regional impact by establishing sustaining partnerships rooted in lifelong learning and building a culture of value-centered innovation.

Ready to get started? Explore resources to spark conversation and identify next steps.
Section 5
A Call to Action
In order to succeed in today’s economy, it is necessary for individuals to learn, unlearn, and relearn as they navigate employment and education throughout their careers.

Likewise, higher education institutions must also commit to their own process of learning, unlearning, and relearning to respond to the needs of learners and partners.

The 2021 cohort of Designers in Residence at the Lab believe that it is imperative that higher education, and its leaders, seek opportunities to more effectively partner across regional ecosystems through building a resilient infrastructure, leveraging influence to align ecosystems, and investing in an incentivizing innovation.

By understanding the motivations, needs, and goals of learners and stakeholders, higher education can adapt their internal infrastructure to support timely adaptations and create permeable learning pathways that enable a learner or worker to upskill and reskill as careers and interests demand. Institutions that commit to unlearning practices that perpetuate inequities and allocate resources and influence to incentivize new innovations create an environment for long-term impact rooted in regional economic mobility.

Doing so will not only create opportunity for individual learners most harmed by the current system, but will scale economic opportunity for all.

The conversation and visioning shared here is just getting started, and we welcome and need all voices in shaping what a truly equitable future can be.
Resources to Start Aligning Your Ecosystem and Building Toward the Future State

Are you a leader ready to take the next step to align your education and workforce ecosystem?

To drive change within a regional ecosystem, it is first essential to understand the current state, including existing partnerships, goals, and work, the nature of what exists, and voices that are not currently present in regional efforts for economic mobility.

Explore two resources we've developed to get you started.

Ecosystems Self-Assessment + Facilitator’s Guide
Google Slides or PDF

A tool to catalyze conversations between partners and stakeholders regarding the perspectives, drivers, successes, and areas of growth across your ecosystem, plus space to prioritize goals and track next steps. Designed with both a built-in guide for facilitators and a workbook for varying methods of engagement.

First Steps to Regional Transformation
Micro-site (Figma)

An interactive resource and exploratory guide that offers first steps in implementing the three levers for regional transformation. For each lever, we provide inquiry-based questions to dig deeper in understanding existing processes and systems, who is most affected by the outcomes of what exists, and what’s missing, alongside suggestions of short-term actions to kickstart each inquiry. We recommend using this tool after completion of the Ecosystems Self-Assessment, as we offer inquiry, ideas, and actions as first steps to build towards the elements of the future state that you, partners, and stakeholders have collectively identified as priorities.
Section 6

Glossary: Defining Key Language
A recurring theme of this work is a lack of shared language and understanding of key words between people working in the same space, towards similar goals. Through our work with 11 higher education leaders and across our Lab team, we identified several key words that need defining. Below, we offer definitions for language that is most prominent in our conversations:

**Regional ecosystems:**
A series of relationships, networks, and stakeholders connected by a common geography, shared identity, or collective goal. We use the term ecosystem to imply that there are multiple interconnected and often evolving relationships, dependencies, and connection points across stakeholders.

**Ecosystems alignment:**
The process by which organizations, institutions, and stakeholders within an ecosystem build: clear communication and feedback channels; a shared understanding of goals, vision, and language; a common set of metrics and process to evaluate progress to goals. Aligned ecosystems are comprised of formal and informal partnerships across stakeholders connected in this shared vision and understanding of goals.

**Equity:**
When we close economic, resource, and opportunity gaps across the learn-to-work ecosystem, and in turn, outcomes are not predictable based on someone’s identities (adapted from Creative Reaction Lab).

**New majority learners:**
Based on today’s enrollment numbers, and certainly population trends, the once thought “nontraditional” student is the new majority. College was never designed for the success of (and often designed to purposefully keep out) parent learners, first-generation college students, learners who are Black, indigenous, or working class, those working part- or full-time, or those experiencing basic needs’ insecurities. We call out new majority learners because we know and see through our work that learners with different identities or life experiences are often excluded in the design of new and existing programs and offerings. For a deep dive into who new majority learners are, visit eddesignlab.org/newmajoritylearners.

**Higher education leaders:**
In this work, we refer to “leaders” as designers and decision-makers with power to change processes, systems, and the experience of stakeholders within their college, university, or region. These leaders may include presidents, provosts, deans, and heads of workforce and innovation. Changing the current will require leadership and buy-in from all stakeholders—learners and community members, faculty at institutions, among many others we notice who are not often referred to as “leaders” within higher ed systems. Higher ed must first take steps to bring these stakeholders into conversation as co-designers.
Background + Acknowledgements

About the Lab’s Designers in Residence Program

The Education Design Lab’s Designers in Residence program is a remote opportunity for leaders to collaborate with the Lab in co-creating the future of learning and work.

The June 2021 - March 2022 cohort brought together a design team of 11 visionary thinkers and doers from postsecondary institutions across the United States to evolve and strengthen the role of colleges to be regional change agents to close economic and racial opportunity gaps, and ultimately, redesign the future role of colleges in their communities. This initiative was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The views expressed throughout this work are those of the Lab and our Designers in Residence, and should not be attributed to the foundation.

About the Lab

The Education Design Lab—the Lab, for short—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. At the Lab, we believe that human-centered design allows stakeholders to map and galvanize their existing strengths to best center and meet the needs of the students that they serve. The Lab’s process also considers the needs of employers, translating curriculum and program design to make skills more visible to students and employers alike.

Learn More + Meet the Designers in Residence eddesignlab.org/designersinresidence

Find Tools to Align Your Regional Ecosystem eddesignlab.org/ecosystemsframework

Get an inside look on our on-the-ground work—delivered right to your mailbox.
Join the Innovator Network
Say hello connect@eddesignlab.org
Find us on LinkedIn Education Design Lab
Follow the Lab on Twitter @eddesignlab #DIR
Thank you to our cohort of leaders for questioning, reflecting, and collaborating to reimagine the future of our national higher ed system and how we can get there.

And, thank you for your trust, openness, and partnership in this work, and for each of your leadership in this new community. Thank you to Leah Moschella for her authorship and expertise in developing the framework and tools shared here, and for cultivating a community of care and shared learning through her leadership of this cohort. Thank you to Kenna Fallon for her partnership and expertise in thought, product, and practice, including the visualization and development of the ideas and learnings surfaced. Thank you to Kevin Stump, Roseline Pandian, Stephanie Ogilvie Seagle, Nishita Chheda, and additional members of the Lab team who aided in the development of this work.

Additionally, we want to thank and wholeheartedly acknowledge the work of antiracism, equity, and inclusion experts that we’ve learned from over the course of the development of this work, namely in reshaping our process and approach, alongside the language we use to talk about our work and those that we work with. These experts include:

Creative Reaction Lab  
Creativereactionlab.com

Dr. Christine Marie Ortiz Guzman, Equity Meets Design  
equitymeetsdesign.com

Equity Design Collaborative  
equitydesigncollaborative.com

Our learning in how to best align our work and how we show up to it with antiracist, anti-oppression, and restorative justice efforts is a lifelong journey, and we welcome feedback, suggestions, and sharing of resources in service of a shared mission to design for equity, and ultimately, true growth, belonging, and agency of each of our experiences and livelihoods.
How to Cite this Work

We hope that this work inspires a broader community of practice around systems-level work led by higher education. We hope that you use the resources and framework we’ve developed to start conversations and test what it might look like to align on understanding before driving towards the future.

In sharing this work, we ask that you keep our logos where they are, maintain our branding, and offer a link to eddesignlab.org/ecosystemsframework, so that others might find this work and our collaborators who collectively developed it.