



Education
Design Lab

Single Moms Success Design Challenge

**Supporting single mothers’
success in college in preparation for
family-sustaining careers.**

Design Insights — an Education Design Lab publication series

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About the Education Design Lab and Design Insights Publication Series

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 believes human-centered design allows colleges and universities to map and galvanize their existing strengths to meet the needs of the students they serve. The Lab's process also shows higher education leaders how to consider the needs of employers, using the curriculum and program design as a gateway to make skills more visible to students and employers alike.

Design Insights is a publication series designed to share insights from initiatives led and supported by the Lab as part of the [Learner Revolution](#), which is about changing the future of learning and work in response to the needs of learners, workers, and the evolving labor market. The future of education, training, and work lies with [new majority learners](#), who include parent learners, students of color, first-generation students, low-income students, and underinvested communities, around whom the Lab is orienting our work through our [Learner Engagement Framework](#).



Introduction



“I am a full-time student, I work full time, and I’m a full-time mom. It’s hard to balance everything.”

Single Mother Learner



“[Coming back to school] was definitely challenging, but I did it mainly for my daughter to give her a better life. I want to give her something to be proud of. I want her to know that she can overcome, and she can do anything she wants to do if she puts her mind to it.”

Single Mother Learner



“Having my daughter motivated me. I just wanted to provide for her and to work toward self-fulfillment. I wanted to have a job where I can be happy and feel happy every day.”

Single Mother Learner

Single mothers' life experiences provide them with unique strengths and skills, valuable perspectives, and huge opportunities to impact future generations. Research also shows that single mother learners and their children have [significant potential](#) to contribute to their local communities and accelerate economic growth, especially when investments are made in their education. Often the sole financial supporters and caregivers in their families, single mother learners take on [more debt](#) than other parent learners on top of already being much [more likely to live in poverty](#) than married mothers and other women. Although most parent learners are [mothers](#), and most mothers in college are single, single mother learners often [face major barriers](#) to enrollment and educational success, such as time poverty, financial strain, and limited child care options. Single mothers frequently find themselves in a paradoxical position:

Their children are both what drives them to enroll in college and what makes it so challenging to complete, given that higher ed was not designed with them in mind.

Like other [new majority learner](#) populations, single mother learners have rarely been the focus of higher education, despite their prevalence. ECMC Foundation's investments to support single mother learners' educational attainment target this gap, and the Lab is honored to partner with them in leading the [Single Moms Success Design Challenge](#). The pilots resulting from our design process with four colleges pave the way for these learners to more seamlessly integrate school, family, life, and work. They aim to dramatically increase single mother learners' degree and credential attainment rates so they and their children may have greater access to family-sustaining career opportunities and a deeper sense of self-determination and well-being.

In this Single Moms Success Design Insights Brief, the Lab shares design insights from over two years of human-centered design work focusing on single mother learners in community colleges, highlights key learnings, and paints a picture of the pilots developed through this project. Through this we hope to inform future work at institutions and organizations beyond the Single Moms Success cohort, raise awareness of the power of creating models that focus on benefiting single mothers, and affect systems change.

Did You Know?

Single mother learners make up 10% of all undergraduate students.

89% of single mother college students in the US have low incomes, and each additional level of education they complete decreases their chances of living in poverty by 32%.

Only 28% of single mother learners earn a degree or credential within six years of enrolling in college.



Single Moms Success Design Challenge

Community colleges play a critical role in supporting economic opportunity for people in their communities who have been historically underinvested in. In line with this, community colleges serve more parent learners than other education providers do.

The Design Question

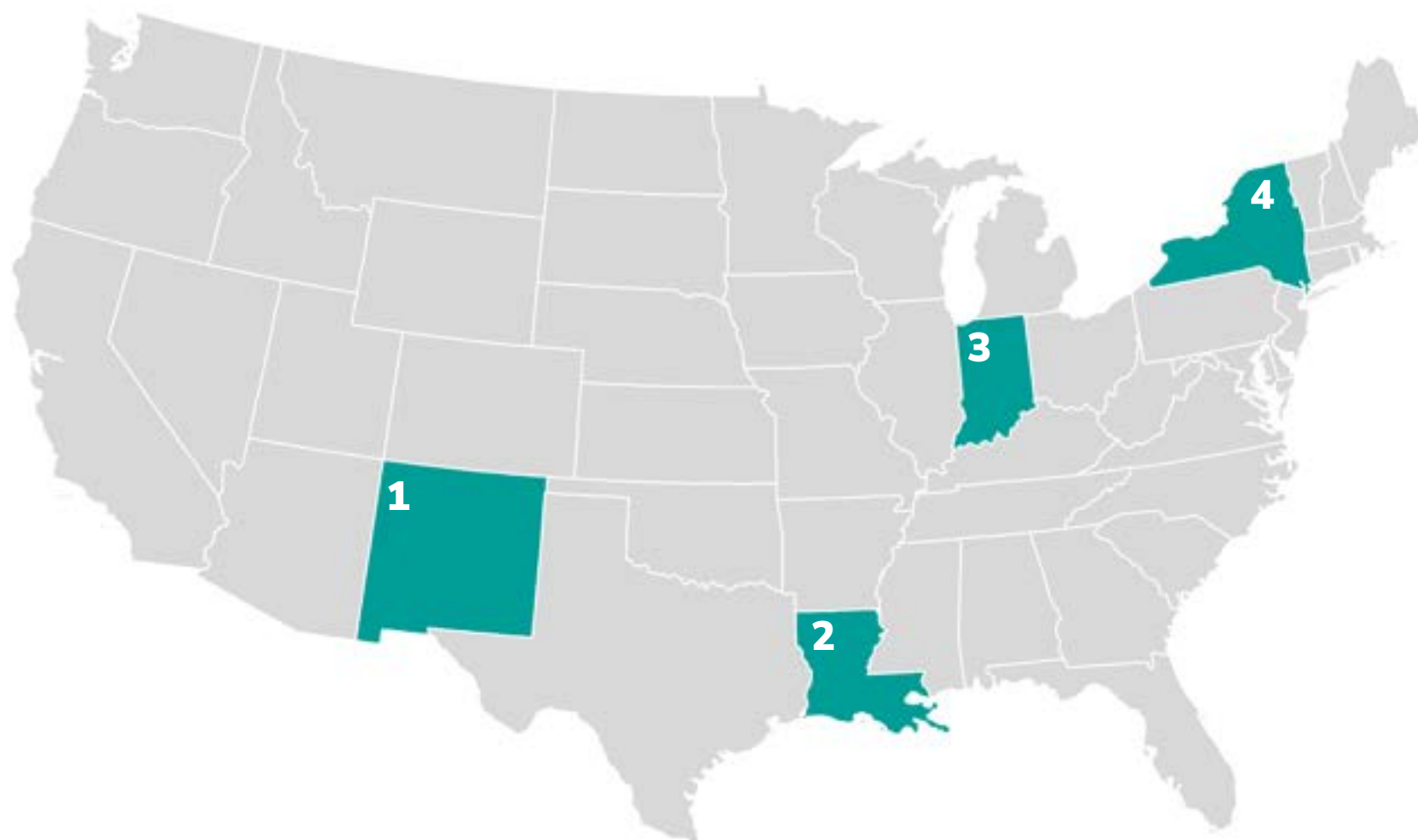
In 2019 the Lab, with support from ECMC Foundation, led a cohort of community colleges through a human-centered design process to answer the design question:

How might community colleges dramatically improve completion rates for single mothers by intentionally addressing the unique needs of this population?

The Cohort

The Lab selected four institutions from across the country to participate in the Single Moms Success Design Challenge cohort:

- 1. Central New Mexico Community College**
Albuquerque, New Mexico
- 2. Delgado Community College**
New Orleans, Louisiana
- 3. Ivy Tech Community College**
Indianapolis, Indiana
- 4. Monroe Community College**
Rochester, New York



The Goal

The Single Moms Success cohort aims to achieve a 30% increase in attainment of degrees and high-quality credentials by single mother learners at each participating school, impacting at least 6,000 single moms total by summer 2024.

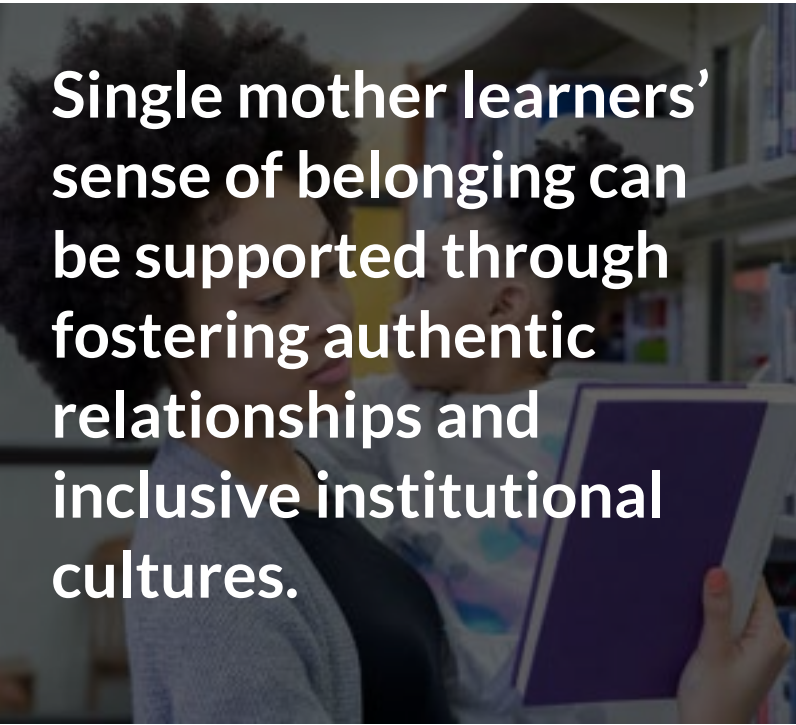
While COVID-19 occurring in the middle of this design challenge has presented many difficulties for the cohort – including budget cuts, staff turnover, strained capacity, and personal losses – it has also reinforced the importance of this work. Research shows [COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted many single mother learners](#); a large portion of single moms work in [low-paying service industry jobs](#) that disappeared during the pandemic, and school and child care closures exacerbated their time poverty.

As the Lab has led the Single Moms Success cohort through this design challenge, several key design insights have emerged that are explored later in this brief.

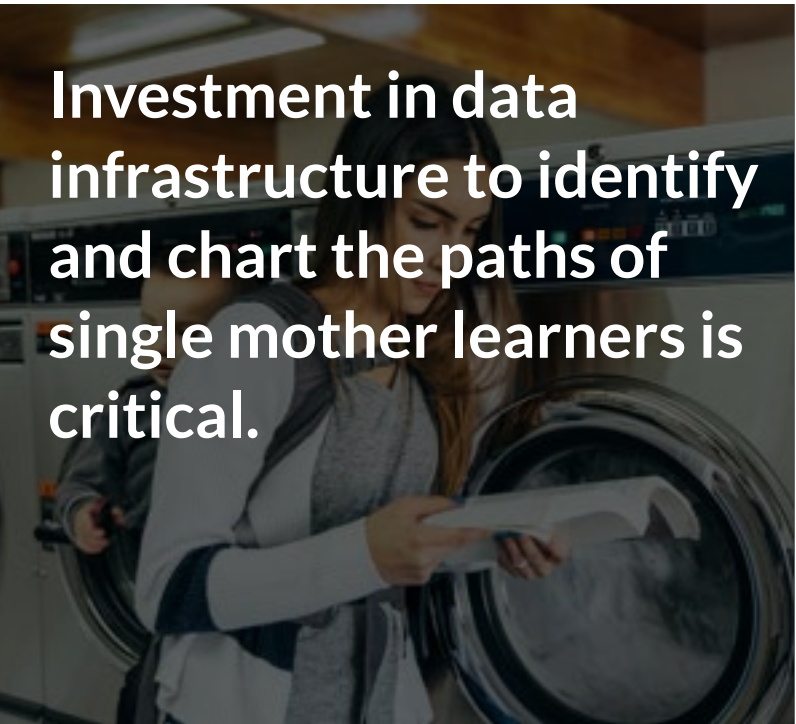
Design Insights



Streamlined support models that pair basic needs supports with career-building opportunities can enable a sense of growth for single mothers.



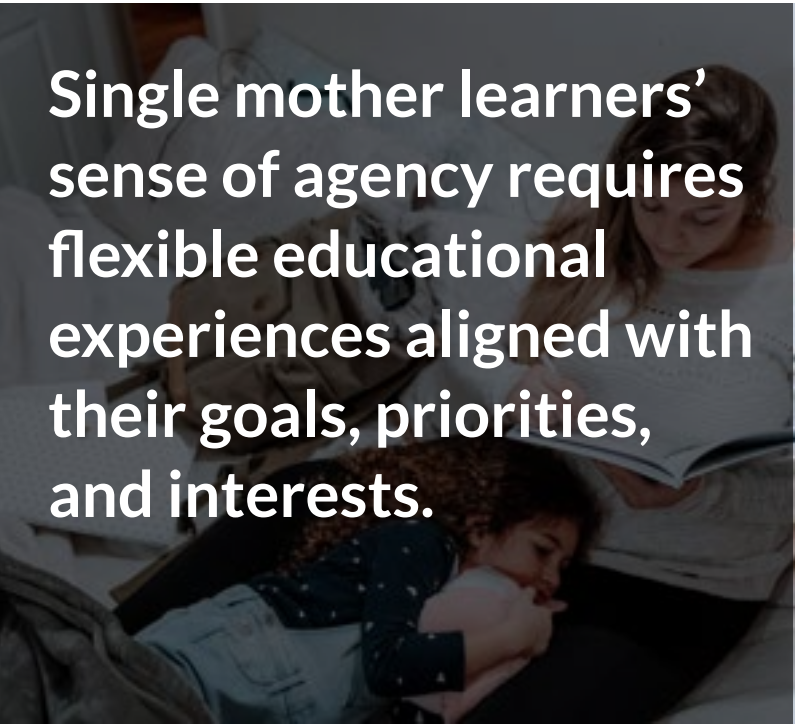
Single mother learners' sense of belonging can be supported through fostering authentic relationships and inclusive institutional cultures.



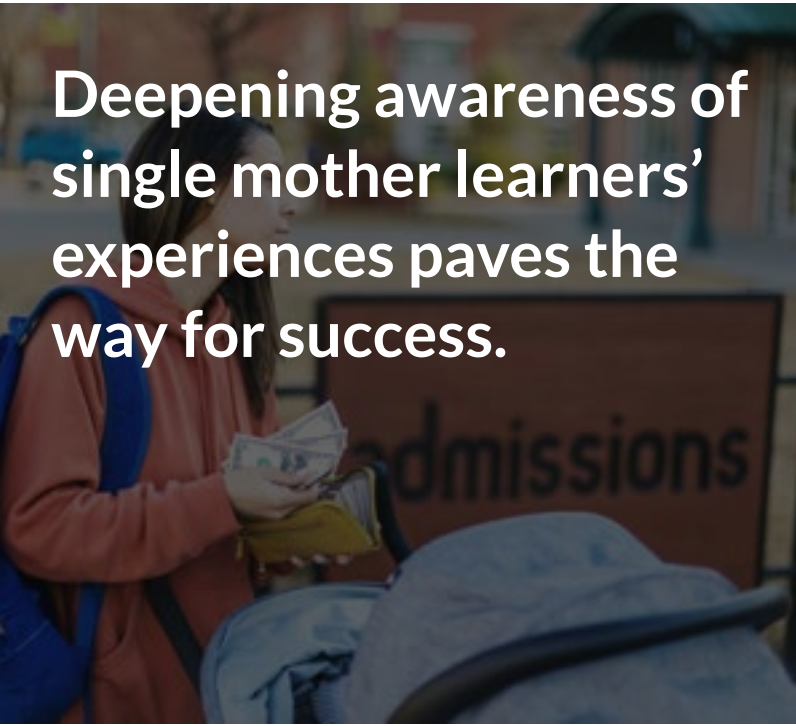
Investment in data infrastructure to identify and chart the paths of single mother learners is critical.



Colleges must collaborate – within and beyond the institution – for sustainability and scale.



Single mother learners' sense of agency requires flexible educational experiences aligned with their goals, priorities, and interests.



Deepening awareness of single mother learners' experiences paves the way for success.

“When I think about this project specifically, I think about reimagination – really being able to reimagine what student supports look like for single moms and for student parents broadly speaking, knowing that higher education was not designed for single mothers. We need to be really intentional about meeting single moms where they are now, in light of everything that is happening, as we know the COVID pandemic has really exacerbated those inequities.”

Rosario Torres,
ECMC Foundation
Program Officer

A photograph of three people in a meeting, overlaid with a teal color filter. On the left, a man in a suit and tie is gesturing with his hands while speaking. In the center, a woman with short curly hair and glasses is holding a large sheet of paper with yellow sticky notes. On the right, another woman is standing with her hands on her hips, looking towards the group. The background is a wall covered with many papers, charts, and sticky notes, some of which contain text and percentages like '8%' and '89%'.

Human-Centered Design

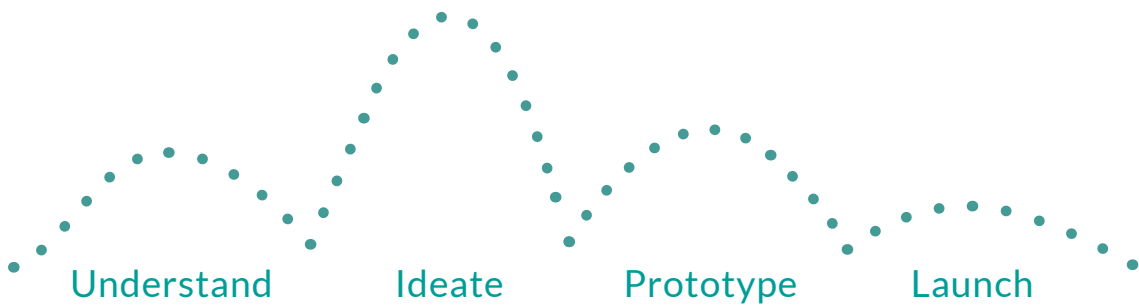
The Lab guides communities through human-centered design processes to bring to life the futures they envision for themselves, internalizing our approach along the way so they can apply it in other settings as well.

Supporting Single Mother Learners As They Build Their Desired Futures

The Design Process

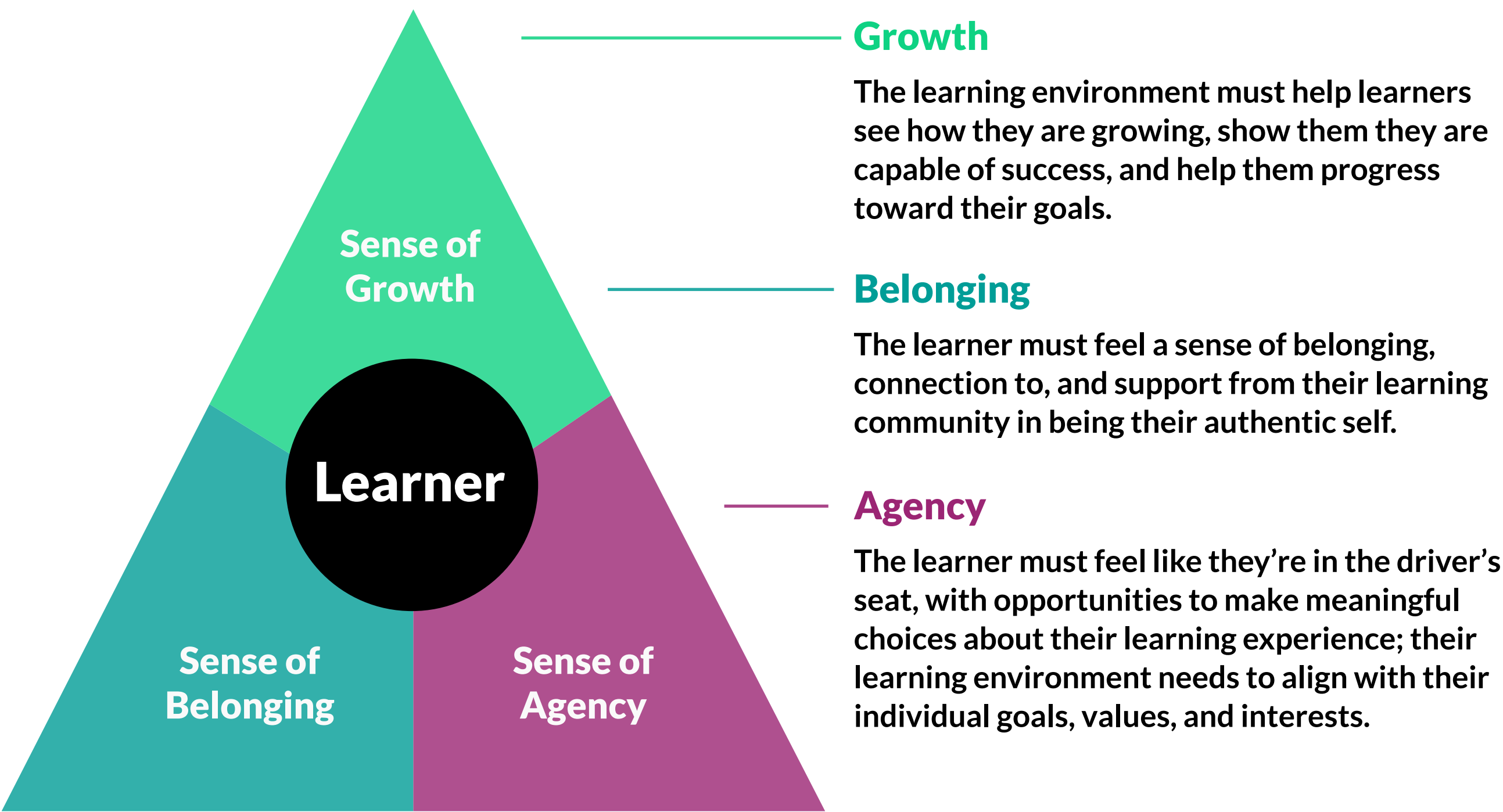
In the Single Moms Success Design Challenge, institutional design teams stayed rooted in the experiences of single mother learners through four design phases:

- 1. Understand
- 2. Ideate
- 3. Prototype
- 4. Launch



Learner Engagement Framework

Throughout each phase, our work was informed by the engagement framework the Lab articulated in [“Walk in My Shoes”: An Actionable Learner Engagement Framework to Foster Growth, Belonging, and Agency.](#) This framework, based on Self-Determination Theory, focuses on how fulfillment of people’s needs for growth, belonging, and agency can lead to deep, sustained learner engagement, higher persistence and completion rates, and enhanced satisfaction and well-being for learners.



Understand Phase

As they kicked off this design challenge, cohort teams conducted interviews with over 100 single mother learners and almost 70 college faculty and staff members on their campuses to gain an in-depth understanding of single moms' experiences with college, their goals, barriers they have faced, and changes they thought could powerfully impact school for learners like them.

The Lab curated this data to build gallery walks that offered a comprehensive picture of single mother learners' experiences and perspectives. In summer 2019, design teams from all four cohort institutions gathered at Ivy Tech Community College for the National Convening of the Single Moms Success Design Challenge.

Local gallery walks gave hundreds of community members, including single mother learners and leaders like [New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell](#), opportunities to build empathy and share insights that fed into the rest of the design process.

Design teams synthesized these gallery reflections into key themes that reflected single mother learners' current experiences with growth, belonging, and agency and that offered inspiration for ideation and design criteria they later used to pressure-test ideas.

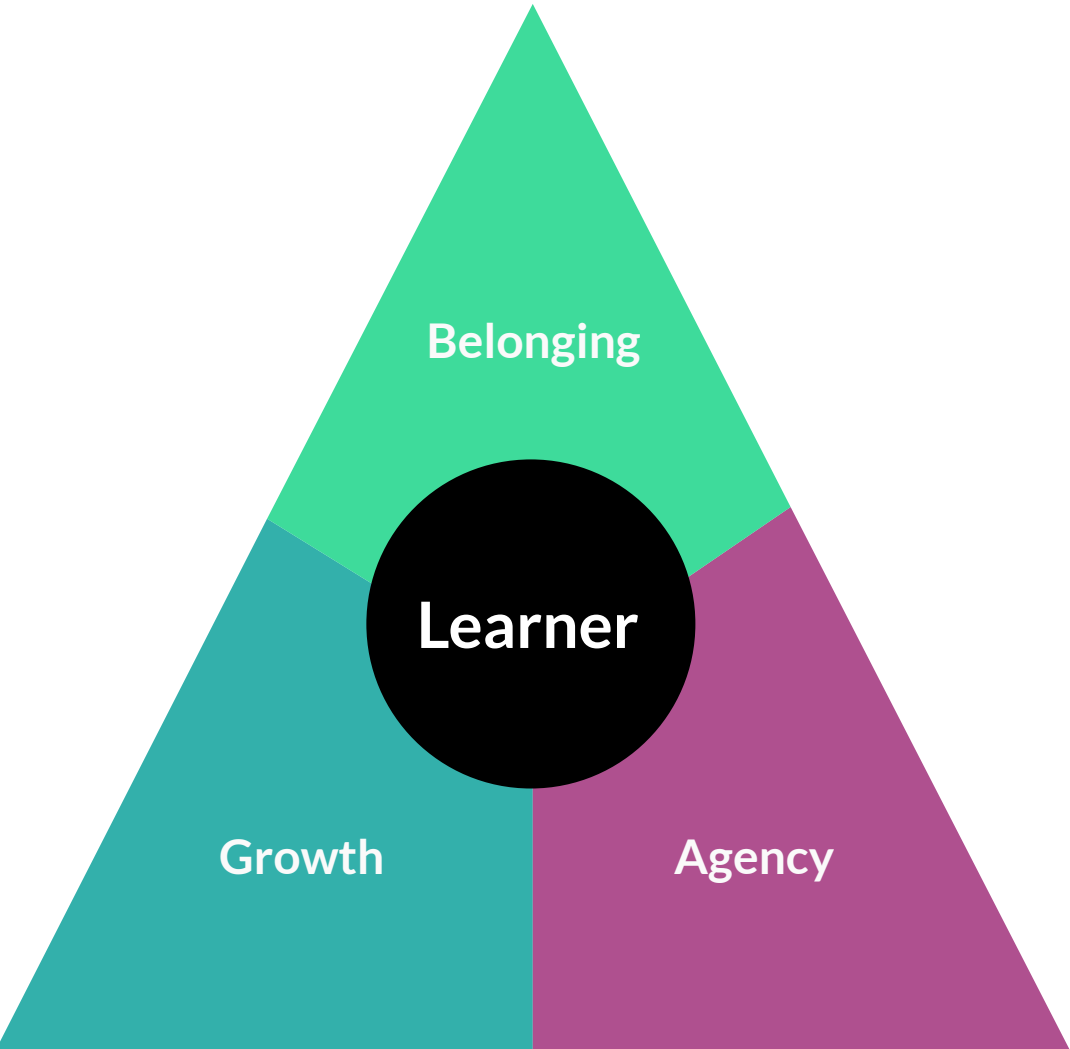
This [video](#) illustrates the learning, relationship building, and design progress that took place at the national convening, rooted in the **Single Moms Success National Gallery**.



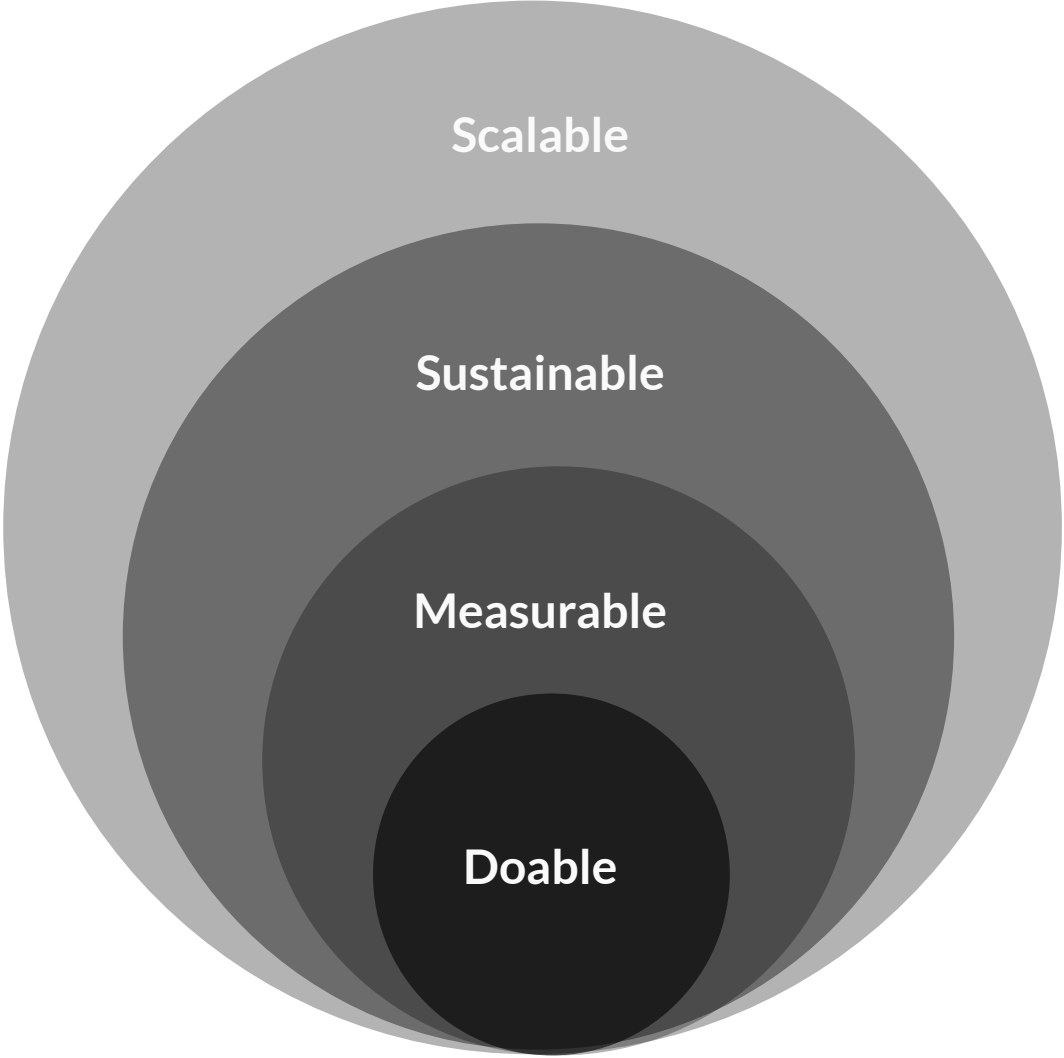
Ideate Phase

During the ideation phase, the cohort translated information and insights collected in the understand phase into open-ended brainstorming, coming up with hundreds of ideas for new programs and system changes. They pressure-tested and iterated on these ideas using design criteria, principles or aspirations that designs should meet to fulfill the needs of the population of focus – in this case, single mother learners.

These design criteria fell into two sets, human-centered design criteria based on the engagement framework discussed above and operational design criteria focused on institutional capacity.



Learner Engagement Framework



Institutional Capacity Design Criteria

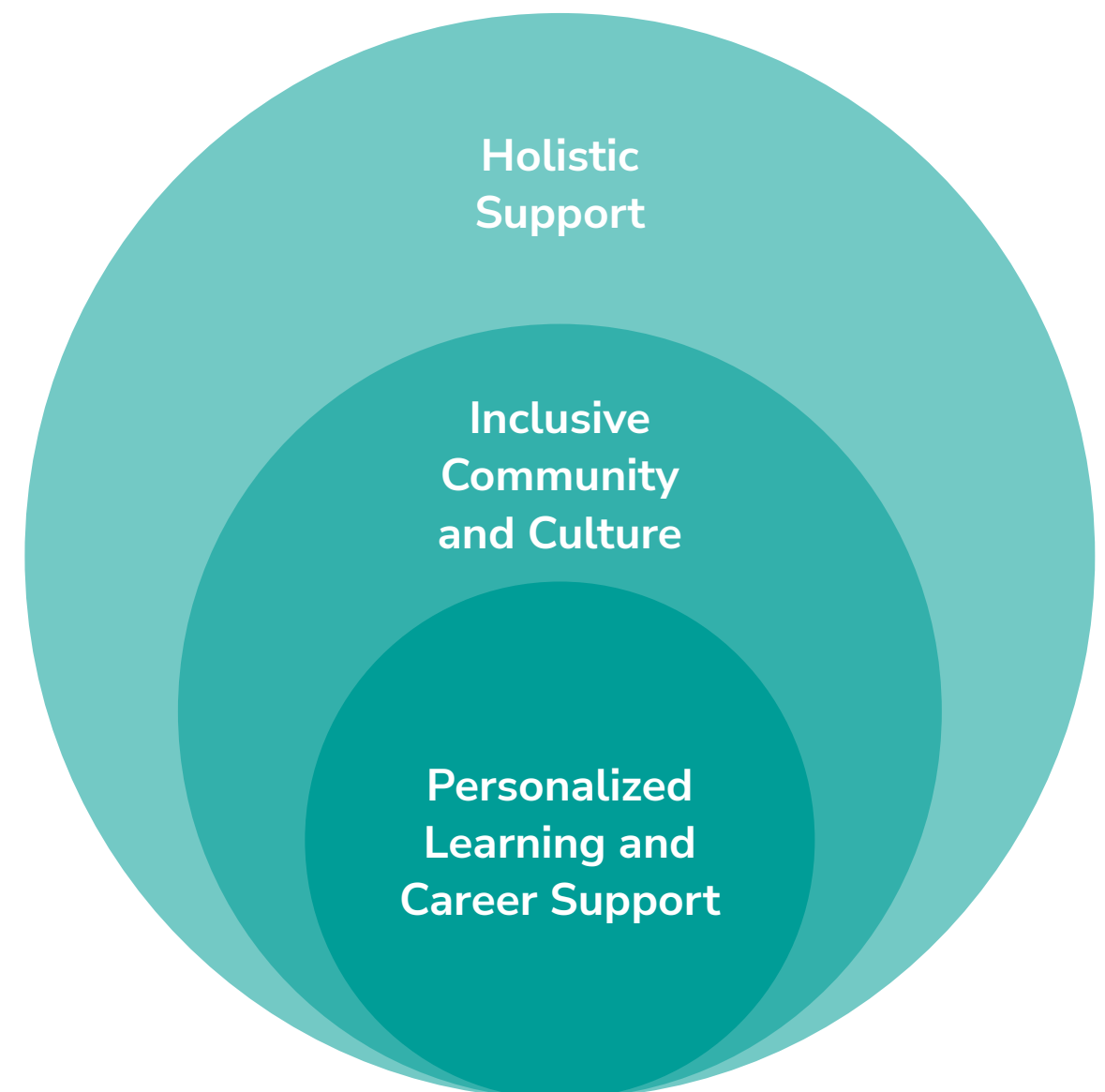


Prototype Phase

As teams leveraged these design criteria to refine their ideas, they developed the most promising ones into prototypes. Prototypes embody key elements of a design and are built to gather critical feedback from stakeholders that can inform continued iteration in the journey toward pilot launch.

Ideas prototyped by the Single Moms Success cohort fell into several major buckets:

1. **Personalized Learning and Career Support**
2. **Inclusive Community and Culture**
3. **Holistic Support**



Launch Phase

During the launch phase that wraps up in fall 2021, all four cohort teams brought their pilots to life and worked to identify evaluation metrics to measure impact and success. Each college has \$50,000 in start-up funding as part of this grant to support pilot implementation. As results and feedback begin to emerge, cohort teams will continue to iterate on their pilots to deepen their impact.



A woman with long dark hair is sitting at a table, looking down at a piece of paper. A young boy is sitting next to her, looking at a tablet. The background shows a wooden cabinet with glass doors. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent teal overlay.

Single Moms Success Pilot Programs

Through this human-centered design process, each Single Moms Success cohort institution developed a pilot tailored to the needs of single mother learners in their communities. All four schools' pilots aim to dramatically increase rates of single mother learners attaining degrees and high-quality credentials, with the hope that this will lead to expanded opportunities for family-sustaining careers. These pilots are launching in fall 2021.

Luna Scholars Program

Institutional Background

Central New Mexico Community College is the largest, most comprehensive community college in New Mexico and the largest higher education institution in the state in terms of undergraduate enrollment. A designated Hispanic Serving Institution, CNM serves more than 33,000 students per year at nine locations in Albuquerque and Rio Rancho. CNM has a history of commitment to initiatives and policies focused on two-generation approaches and parent learners.

Pilot Overview

The Luna Scholars Program will connect single mother learners with funding, supportive relationships, and holistic advising to support their educational success.

CNM is aiming to reach up to 1,500 single moms with family-friendly events and services. The Luna Scholars Program (a scholarship) will be available for 40 learners.

Design Approach | Program Benefits



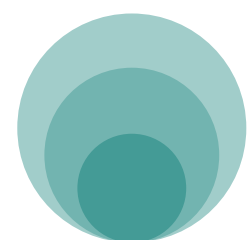
Personalized Learning + Career Support

- + Coaches will guide single mother learners in academic and career planning, with online career assessment tools and CNM's Job Connection Services.
- + Based on their goals and interests, single mother learners will receive referrals to flexible programs already in existence across CNM.



Inclusive Community + Culture

- + Safe, online peer support community for single moms at CNM with frequent posts from designated CNM advising staff to spark engagement.



Holistic Support

- + Targeted, holistic support services and resources from dedicated coaches, accessible in-person, by phone, and online, including: career and major exploration, soft skill supports, course planning through program completion, job placement opportunities, transfer advisement, providing CNM and community resources to meet life and academic needs, financial coaching, successful navigation and completion of college, and family-oriented resources and policies.
- + \$1,500 unrestricted scholarship awarded to a subset of single mother learners based on achieving benchmarks indicating persistence (GPA + program progress).
- + Child care vouchers distributed through CNM's Little Suncats program.

"It's going to be really exciting to get to follow these students from start to finish. Our Facebook group started in November 2020 and is a safe environment for single moms who are going through things. It was great during the pandemic to get insights from single moms on how to handle virtual schooling for them and their kids. The group is theme-based, so we have Motivational Mondays, Tips + Tricks Tuesdays, Wellness Wednesdays, Teamwork Thursdays, and Financial Fridays. I share community resources and institutional information with the students, and the engagement has been really exciting. It's been really eye-opening. I myself was a single mother, so this population is near and dear to my heart and I look forward to seeing their success."

LaToya Turner, Academic Coach at CNM

Single Moms Accessing Resources Timely (SMART)

Institutional Background

Louisiana's oldest and largest community college, Delgado Community College is also the state's second largest educational institution, enrolling over 20,000 students in 2019. Forty-eight percent of children in [New Orleans](#) are raised by single moms, and 58% of single mother families in the city experience poverty. Delgado's participation in this design challenge is bolstered by strong champions, including chancellor Dr. Larissa Littleton-Steib and New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell.

Pilot Overview

The relationship between education, career opportunities, and poverty for single mothers and their children has inspired Delgado's Single Moms Success team to design a pilot program that will offer single moms the support and flexibility they need to persist in school and build fulfilling, family-sustaining careers. **Their SMART (Single Mothers Accessing Resources Timely) pilot approach will enable 2,000 single mother learners to make progress simultaneously in their education, careers, and financial support of their families.**

Design Approach | Program Benefits



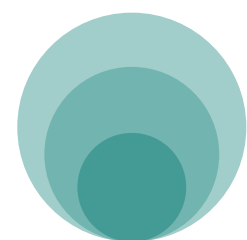
Personalized Learning + Career Support

- + Earn and learn opportunities with living wages to help single moms support their families throughout their time in school.
- + Flexible, asynchronous online courses.
- + Orientation course specifically designed for single mother learners.
- + Industry-specific career navigation.



Inclusive Community + Culture

- + Single moms online community in the Delgado app.
- + Consistent, proactive outreach + resource/support sharing from case management staff.



Holistic Support

- + Holistic online + in-person case management.
- + Findhelp.org, an online social care network, for needs assessments and resource referrals.
- + Scholarships + child care vouchers specifically for single mother learners.
- + Transportation assistance.

Thousands of Delgado's learners have already accessed Findhelp.org (formerly known as Aunt Bertha), a social care network which played a critical role to connect them with community resources in the wake of Hurricane Ida. Hundreds of single mother learners have joined the online community, and feedback from participants in the initial run of the student success course specifically for single moms has been overwhelmingly positive:

"This class has been a mirror to my life because it made me re-evaluate myself, challenge myself, better understand myself, feel more confident in myself...We did a mommy and me team project for Ms. Shelly's class. Our team name was the 'Never-Giver-Uppers,' and our mascot was the eagle because baby, we soar high. We beat the odds."

Tarcelyn James, a single mom and nursing student at Delgado

Ivy Parents Achieve Success with Support (I.PASS)

Institutional Background

Ivy Tech serves nearly 200,000 students annually across its more than 40 locations throughout Indiana, making it one of the largest community college systems in the country. Its Single Moms Success team came to this design challenge with the intent to pursue a state-level approach, drawing on a strong track record for scale demonstrated by its transformative student success efforts in recent years. Dr. Sue Ellspermann, President of Ivy Tech and once a single mom herself, has been an instrumental champion of this work.

Pilot Overview

Ivy Tech's Ivy Parents Achieve Success with Support (I.PASS) pilot aims to build a cohort of single mothers that includes dedicated wraparound support services, workforce-aligned programming, and access to community partners. The program is being piloted on four campuses starting in fall 2021 (Indianapolis, Muncie, Lafayette, and Sellersburg) with a potential reach of 2,600 learners.

Design Approach | Program Benefits



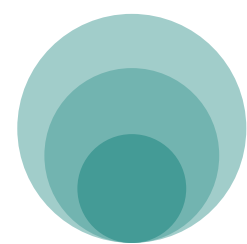
Personalized Learning + Career Support

- + Enrollment in Single Moms IVYT Course during their first term with a tuition waiver.
- + "Learn Anywhere" flexible classes: Each week learners have the option to choose between online, face-to-face, or virtual learning options.
- + Career-building support through creation of career development portfolio, meetings with career coaches, and access to earn-and-learn opportunities.
- + Weekly study hall with child care, enrichment activities for kids, meals, and online access options.



Inclusive Community + Culture

- + Community-building experiences online and in-person for single mother learners, including discussion boards, family-friendly workshops, and monthly meetings with I.PASS coordinator.



Holistic Support

- + Supported access to Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).
- + Regular meetings with a dedicated coordinator for needs assessments, goal identification, and referrals to other supports and resources.
- + Opportunities for social interactions between single student parents.
- + Computer provided for all cohort participants.

Ivy Tech's Learn Anywhere model originated with its Single Moms Success team and was scaled rapidly to almost 10,000 students across the institution when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

"Learn Anywhere was founded in work we did with the Education Design Lab focusing on the needs of single mothers, and it fundamentally changed the way we think about learners as a whole at Ivy Tech. Learn Anywhere has been unbelievably favorably adopted and accepted by learners, faculty, and staff."

Chris Lowery, Ivy Tech's Senior Vice President of Workforce, Careers, and Adult Strategy

Single Mothers Network



Institutional Background

Monroe Community College, part of the SUNY system, serves over 25,000 students per year in upstate New York. MCC collects more data on student parents than any other college nationwide. Their methodology, which allows them to regularly update their records of students’ parental and marital status, has helped them and the rest of the cohort more accurately identify single mother learners and track their progress.

Pilot Overview

The Single Mothers Network for MCC’s 954 single mother learners includes targeted learning supports, expanded community networks, and customized, flexible learning options, and efforts to build a family-friendly institutional culture.

Design Approach | Program Benefits



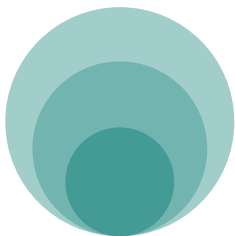
Personalized Learning + Career Support

- + Virtual advising + online tutoring.
- + Family-Friendly Syllabi additions informed by [Generation Hope](#).
- + Flexible coursework options to allow for unanticipated absences.
- + Career GPS hub: career assessments + more for single mother learners.



Inclusive Community + Culture

- + Virtual, family-friendly orientation.
- + Coalition to elevate voices of single mother learners.
- + Inclusion of single mothers in MCC’s equity and diversity training.



Holistic Support

- + Partnership with Child Care Council for services and subsidies.
- + Cross-campus coordination to provide child care resources.
- + Cross-platform communications to share information about emergency funding.

MCC’s online orientation specifically for student parents has produced positive feedback during its first run:

“We used to make students come to campus for orientation, but now we’re offering that virtually for students. In the orientation, we’re highlighting resources including video clips so they’re able to hear stories from other students, and that’s been well-reviewed so far this year.”

Dr. Kim McKinsey-Mabry, Acting Vice President of Student Services at MCC

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey tank top, is looking down at something in her hands. A young child is standing next to her, looking in the same direction. They are in a laundromat, with a washing machine visible in the background. The image is overlaid with a teal color filter.

Design Insights from the Single Moms Success Design Challenge

A series of insights emerged from the SMS cohort's design process, as a result of robust research in each community, reflections from a diverse group of stakeholders, and community, and team-based design activities. These insights served as guiding lights for the SMS cohort as they moved through their pilot design process. We believe they can highlight key opportunities and spaces and design considerations for other institutions looking to engage in this work.

DESIGN INSIGHT 1

Streamlined support models that pair basic needs supports with career-building opportunities can enable a sense of growth for single mothers.

Single mother learners often return to college so they can better provide for their families.

To support them in reaching their goals, schools should offer seamless, holistic support models that simultaneously remove barriers related to basic needs, connect them with high-quality affordable child care, and support them in defining paths through college to family-sustaining careers in growing industries.

Design Innovation in Action

All of the Single Moms Success pilots work to provide just-in-time holistic support that both addresses basic need insecurities and incorporates career-oriented advising from enrollment onward.

Central New Mexico Community College

CNM brings together career coaching, case management, and academic advising through delivery by the same person, a dedicated advisor for single mother learners who can do everything from helping them take advantage of CCAMPIS funding for child care, to refer them to flexible programs at the school, to editing her resume.

Delgado Community College

Delgado's case managers serve as hubs to provide warm handoffs for single mother learners to Findhelp.org for connections to community resources, career navigators in their areas of study, and other support.

In all of these relationships, understanding what goals single mother learners have identified for themselves is of great importance, as is making sure they understand the career opportunities that will be accessible to them through the academic paths they choose.

“Another thing with Ms. P [the instructor of an orientation course for single mother learners] – every resource, we knew about it. I’ve been at Delgado since 2017, 2018. I went to school at night, in the early morning. I never knew about any of the resources that Delgado had. Ms. P is everything. That class, I think I took the most seriously of any. I got so much out of that class... I would work from 4 a.m. to 1 p.m. I would take an early lunch at work and either go into the office or in the car so I wouldn’t miss that class.”

**Tricilla Thomas,
A single mother of three boys who recently earned her associate degree in business from Delgado Community College with a focus on small business entrepreneurship.**

DESIGN INSIGHT 2

Single mother learners' sense of belonging can be supported through fostering authentic relationships and inclusive institutional cultures.

Single mother learners need safe relationships on campus to help them feel a sense of belonging, and this may be further supported if their families are embraced by the institutional community.

The intersectional identities of individual single mother learners must be taken into account to strongly support their sense of belonging. Of female students in college, 37% of those who are Black and 27% of those who are American Indian or Alaska Native are single moms. To create cultures that embrace single mother learners, it is imperative that institutions pursue antiracist and anti-biased action plans to break down systemic barriers and build inclusive environments.

“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.”

Design Innovation in Action

All of the Single Moms Success pilots offer new opportunities for single mother learners to build relationships with other parent learners, especially other single mother learners, whether through in-person events, courses designed just for single moms, cohorted programs, or online community groups.

Monroe Community College

Monroe Community College is working toward this by incorporating content about single mother learners' experiences into a number of trainings that faculty, staff, and students go through and by forming a Single Mother Learners Coalition to increase their visibility and organize their voice across campus.

The biggest thing was them knowing that they're not alone. They have a safe place where they can share. They can come to me in my office hours. I want to promote their success in their education, their life goals.”

Shelly Planellas,
Instructor for Delgado's
success course design
specifically for single moms
Delgado Community
College

DESIGN INSIGHT 3

Single mother learners' sense of agency requires flexible educational experiences aligned with their goals, priorities, and interests.

Single mother learners often face time poverty, scheduling limitations, and immense stress in balancing work, family, and school. They need flexible learning and support models to give them the time and space to learn at a pace that works for their lives. Schools also need to support single mother learners in defining paths to family-sustaining careers.

In addition to supporting their sense of growth, this can also have a major impact on their sense of agency through helping them align their school experience with their goals and life priorities.

Design Innovation in Action

Monroe Community College

Monroe Community College is offering online tutoring available 24 hours a day, as well as online access to MCC's Career Coach.

Ivy Tech Community College

Ivy Tech's Learn Anywhere courses give learners a choice week over week about how they would like to engage in their learning – synchronously in person, synchronously online, or asynchronously online.

Central New Mexico Community College

CNM's use of EduNav enables single mother learners to clarify their goals and consider different paths through school in terms of time to completion, course scheduling options, cost, and more. Along with the holistic advising model described earlier, this helps CNM's single mother learners find individualized starting points and paths that align with their goals and life circumstances.

Delgado Community College

At Delgado, case managers will also provide career navigation support and connections to earn-and-learn opportunities aligned with single mother learners' pathways.

“The Single Moms Success Design Challenge has shown the Delgado community how crucial it is to give single mother learners more options and choices about where and when they learn. Delgado's plans to offer asynchronous online and hybrid course options were inspired by this project, and we've seen through COVID that so many learners in addition to single moms benefit from this flexibility so they can fit school in with the rest of their lives. Because of this design challenge, we have committed as an institution to making these flexible options a permanent part of our course offerings.”

Delgado Community College

DESIGN INSIGHT 4

Investment in data infrastructure to identify and chart the paths of single mother learners is critical.

Very few colleges today have systems in place to identify and track parent learners, and no standard definition of “single mother learner” has been established across different institutions. Although information about marital status and dependents may be collected during the application and enrollment process, these life circumstances can change rapidly.

With the ability to dynamically create cohorts of single mother learners on the backend, schools can identify more accurate baseline metrics, offer support and opportunities to more single mother learners, and make data-informed decisions about how to continue improving these learners’ experiences.

Design Innovation in Action

Monroe Community College

Since 2003, MCC has been collecting data on students’ marital & parental status through the use of a survey that students complete each semester when they register for class.

Delgado Community College

Following MCC’s example, Delgado now prompts learners annually during course registration to share their parental and marital status and creates cohorts based on this data.

“Since we know who our student parents are, we are able to ask for their input into how we can better support them and their families. With that information in hand, we are striving to make sure that we address the needs of our student parents during this critical time.”

**Dr. Mary Ann DeMario,
Institutional Research
Specialist at Monroe
Community College**

DESIGN INSIGHT 5

Deepening awareness of single mother learners' experiences paves the way for success.

Intentionally gathering insights from single moms and lifting up their voices across communities – especially with college leaders, employers, community organizations, and policymakers – can raise awareness of their experiences and prompt policy and practice changes that benefit single mother learners, their families, and their communities as a whole.

Design Innovation in Action

The Single Moms Success core design teams involve people with different institutional roles – from IT, workforce, institutional research, academic departments, marketing, administration, and more – to ensure that their work is informed by a diversity of perspectives and championed to a wide variety of audiences. Many team members also are or have been single moms themselves and offer insights and ideas based on their own experiences.

The gallery walks that took place during the understand phase of this design challenge offered an opportunity for hundreds of people from the colleges' communities to develop a foundational understanding of single mother learners' experiences and perspectives. The Ivy Tech team placed their gallery in a high-traffic hallway on their campus for several days so that people in all different roles on campus could see it and begin to understand the need for this work. They also hosted facilitated gallery walk sessions at different times of day to cater to various stakeholder groups, including an evening session geared toward local philanthropy and employer partners. The buy-in and thought partnership these gallery walks generated has provided each team with resources and relationships that can support their pilots into the future, allow them to reach greater numbers of learners, and deepen the kind of systemic, structural change they can affect.

“Already our entire community has started paying more attention to our single mother learners and their needs. Our single mother learners feel more comfortable asking their faculty and staff for assistance. Our employees are more aware of the unique needs of our students and how to help them. Our external stakeholders are asking how they can help in making our students more successful. The momentum around this work is incredible.”

Alisa Wells
Ivy Tech's Director of
Community Engagement and
Wraparound Services

DESIGN INSIGHT 6

Colleges must collaborate – within and beyond the institution – for sustainability and scale.

For our cohort teams, the development and implementation of their pilots would not have been possible without the support from stakeholders across their institutions and communities.

To effectively support single moms, colleges must collaborate with community partners to address basic needs insecurities, including high-quality child care, and with employers to offer family-sustaining job opportunities during and after college.

Design Innovation in Action

Partnerships with community organizations play a key role in every Single Moms Success pilot.

Monroe Community College

Monroe's collaboration with the Child Care Council streamlines parent learners' access to information about high-quality child care options close by and connects them with opportunities for subsidies that they qualify for.

Ivy Tech Community College

By raising awareness of single mother learners' experiences and bringing local philanthropic partners to the table, Ivy Tech has secured major investments that have contributed to sustained funding for its pilot.

Delgado Community College

Delgado's partnership with Findhelp.org connects their learners to a broad online network of resources and supports in their community to address housing and food insecurity, child care needs, and more. The impact of this resource hub became clear this fall as Hurricane Ida tore through New Orleans, leaving a substantial portion of Delgado's learners and staff without power, water, housing, and food. Sharing links to Findhelp.org with the entire student body, including additional multi-channel notifications specifically for single mother learners, prompted thousands of learners to connect with help through the service.

“We want to make sure that even when we complete this pilot, the changes we’re trying to make through it are embedded in the institution itself. Professional development is really going to be critical. Part of that professional development is to highlight the goals for this work and make sure that we continue to get front and center in the institution so everyone knows about this. It’s really about how we’re changing the way that we think about and support this large and important population of students.”

**Dr. Kim McKinsey-Mabry,
Monroe Community College**

The Road Ahead

Over the next several years, each Single Moms Success cohort institution will continue to build on its pilot and bolster its data infrastructure to support program evaluation. As both quantitative and qualitative data are collected about each pilot, the cohort teams will translate learnings from this feedback into changes that further benefit single moms in their communities. The Lab will support the teams as they sustain and scale their pilots, reaching at least 6,000 single moms through these programs by summer 2024 and working to inspire other institutions to adopt similar models as well.

As the Single Moms Success pilots continue to grow in their scope and impact, we will share what we discover along the way. For now, we recommend taking that crucial first step – talk to single mother learners at your school and in your community. Single moms have incredible strengths as problem solvers, multitaskers, relationship builders, resilient go-getters, and individuals whose skills so often go unrecognized in education and the workforce. Understanding their experiences and bringing them directly into decision-making processes will lay the groundwork for change that supports them and so many other learners in creating the futures they want for themselves and their families.

“I don’t have a role model to really focus on, but the reason why I came to college is for the next generation to have a role model through me.”

Single Mother Learner

“All the people who were saying I couldn’t [finish college] and wouldn’t do it, I’m proving them wrong and I’m showing my daughter what you can do. There are no limits. When she sees that mommy does it, that shows her that she can do it, no matter how long it takes.”

Single Mother Learner



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