“Walk In My Shoes”
An Actionable Learner Engagement Framework to Foster Growth, Belonging, and Agency

revised November 2022

Education Design Lab
About the Education Design Lab

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. At the Lab, we believe that human-centered design allows stakeholders to map and galvanize their existing strengths to better 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. You can learn more at eddesignlab.org.

About the Lab’s Toolkit Publication Series

A core area of our work is to train for human-centered—often learner- and employer-centered—design and change management through working on the ground with partners to conduct community-centered research, rapid prototyping, and innovation capacity diagnostics and training. The Lab’s Toolkit publication series highlights our growing set of human-centered design tools iterated and tested over seven years working with more than 250+ stakeholder entities including colleges, employers, community college systems, nonprofits, K-12 school districts, and foundations.

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Section 1

“Walk In My Shoes”

A Letter By Kathleen deLaski
Founder and President, Education Design Lab
An Actionable Learner Engagement Framework

customers of higher education. This presents an urgent design challenge. "new majority" of college learners are in many ways now the key generation college students, adult learners, students working part- or college an immediate given after high school. Parent learners, first-

At the Lab, the learners we focus on travel very different journeys than needs, values, and strengths. we want to keep top of mind, a typology of their vital experiences, goals, synthesizing these insights, designers asked in focus groups: "Do you like this, or that?" Interviews based on Human-centered design tries to get underneath the basic questions often need to permeate the process. for the learner's perspective and context of their whole journey to "upskill" to a new career. And whether we are co-designing a first-year single mom, a first-in-family college applicant, a frontline worker hoping of the specific learners we are designing better outcomes for and with: a table, literally and figuratively, to help all stakeholders walk in the shoes starts a "design challenge," we push partners to bring learners to the empathy, which is the heart of the Lab's design process. When the Lab

Yet, new student enrollment at community colleges is down 10% this year, which points to the massive upskilling and training task before us. Forty-two percent of jobs lost during the pandemic are not expected to return, which presents an urgent design challenge to keep new majority learners

Amid the calls to 2020 to challenge the racial and economic inequities of systems such as education and employment, we were struck by the relevance and usefulness of our engagement strategies and strengths based upon key findings from research in psychology and behavioral science that we have contextualized—using the Lab's learnings from the past seven years—to resonate with learning providers. Informed frameworks that guide our work built upon key findings from research in psychology and behavioral science that we have contextualized—using the Lab's learnings from the past seven years—to resonate with learning providers. Informed frameworks that guide our work built upon key findings from research in psychology and behavioral science that we have contextualized—using the Lab's learnings from the past seven years—to resonate with learning providers.
The challenges for new majority learners go beyond pedagogy, and concern the real-world barriers and practical issues people face in trying to change their lives for the better. “Walk in My Shoes” focuses on co-creating realistic pathways for progress, and inspiring people’s confidence and motivation to take new steps forward through applying a philosophy of facilitation, enablement, and support. Facilitating engagement requires understanding the needs, obstacles, and aspirations of new majority learners. The “Walk in My Shoes” approach takes that inside perspective of the learner and responds to it with effective supports and resources, providing a scaffolding for achieving success.
Section 2

Introduction: Engaging New Majority Learners in the Age of COVID-19
In trying to better understand the experiences of learners, learner engagement is the holy grail. The same underlying drivers of learner engagement can inspire a 16-year-old to pursue college right away, a stopped-out college student to come back, a worker to dip a toe into a new course to gain in-demand skills. Learner engagement and satisfaction of its underlying drivers have repeatedly been shown to predict persistence and retention, academic performance, completion rates, student satisfaction, and career outcomes. As a result, people’s engagement as learners can affect their economic mobility for the rest of their lives, impact key metrics for learning providers, and shape regional economic growth.

Decades of research in psychology and behavioral science have shown that three key drivers—growth, belonging, and agency—have an outsized impact on learners’ engagement, success in reaching their goals, and well-being. Yet these are rarely discussed amid higher education’s ongoing crises. Leveraging core principles of Self-Determination Theory and the Lab’s seven years of work with learners and leaders in higher ed, our team has articulated a learner engagement framework, with accompanying insights and examples from our work to co-create new models with colleges and other learning providers.

Now, it seems, this learner engagement framework is more important than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a worldwide labor market crisis. With unemployment reaching its highest rate ever recorded in the US, Black and Latinx workers hardest hit by job loss, parent learners juggling kids at home with online school and heightened financial stress, and as many as 42% of jobs lost due to the pandemic disappearing for good, we see colleges, communities, and employers coming to the table to prioritize learners and workers who have historically been shut out of and marginalized by higher education.

Wendi Copeland, chief strategic partnership activation officer at Goodwill Industries International and Lab partner, points to the urgent need for effective models that nurture upskilling and reskilling in the COVID-19 era and beyond, saying: “We have no time to waste. We must prioritize building a more equitable, inclusive future of work to address unemployment and underemployment, and we must do it now. Designing learning opportunities that are responsive to the lives of workers and learners today is one of the most crucial elements of this.”

Why here, why now? Change was forced upon us this year, and colleges everywhere have risen to the challenge. In some ways, COVID-19, and the mainstreaming of racial inequity outrage, have increased the need for traditional institutions to open up new “design channels” to invent, prototype, and build. Lee Lambert, chancellor of Pima Community College, notes that today’s learners face the intersection of three phenomena “that really have not been talked about together: COVID-19, shifting industry needs, and our racial reckoning. “The key is how these three actually come together and lay the groundwork for reimagining education, not only now but for the future of education, teaching, learning, and work.”

This actionable learner engagement framework offers hands-on guidance informed by the Lab’s past work with recommended practices for that reimagination process and illustrative examples from the field. We believe that if we don’t support learners’ growth, agency, and belonging, we will fail the majority of learners, the next generation, and the many workers who will need to join the massive employment shift in a post-COVID, quickly automating world. We share examples from the field to illustrate best practices for building more engaging, effective education-to-workforce pipelines for today’s new majority learners.
Section 3

Understanding Learner Engagement
The learner engagement framework described in this publication provides one roadmap as you consider and pressure test new tools, processes, programmatic or experiential offerings, or an entire delivery model. To develop this framework, we leveraged the research and core findings from Self-Determination Theory, a metatheory of human behavior and motivation that has been developed through research over the past forty years by hundreds of psychologists and behavioral scientists. Using guiding principles of Self-Determination Theory and seven years of our work, we have articulated an actionable framework and key insights to help higher ed practitioners design solutions that are more responsive to the needs of their learners.

**What is Learner Engagement?**

Learner engagement can be thought of in terms of learners’ behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Research indicates that no learner is inherently “motivated” or “unmotivated,” “engaged” or “disengaged.” Rather, their motivation and engagement are heavily informed by their relationship with the learning environments and education systems they’ve encountered. High drop-out and dropout rates within new majority learner populations reveal a system that was not designed for their success and that creates barriers at every step of their journey. Self-determination Theory emphasizes all humans’ inherent inclination to learn and grow while also demonstrating that individuals’ environments must appropriately support their psychological needs in order to facilitate deep, sustained engagement in learning.

Questions to Consider When Thinking About Learner Engagement

- How much time does a learner spend on learning?
- How often do they do it?
- How deep does a learner dive into learning?
- What kind of intellectual curiosity and thoughtfulness do they bring to it?
- How invested in and connected to their learning do they feel?

This necessitates a perspective shift: Learning providers have the responsibility to intentionally redesign learning experiences and education systems so that they provide new majority learners, more specifically learners on the tail end of economic, resource, and opportunity gaps, with the support they need to be able to deeply engage with their learning.

**Defining Success**

Throughout our work, we are quick to call out systemic inequities and barriers to learner success. It is critical to measure and define success based on the context in which it is named. For the purpose of this framework, we use “learner success” to signal when a learner has agency and ownership over defining goals for themselves, all basic psychological needs met (growth, agency, and belonging), and the opportunities and resources needed to meet their goals.
Recognizing the responsibility of learning providers to design for learner engagement does not, however, mean that learners need to be controlled from the outside in order to engage with their learning. Countless research studies have highlighted the benefits of a “need-supportive motivating style,” while documenting the ill effects of extrinsic rewards, punishments, and high-stakes testing—as well as social comparisons, controlling feedback, and other types of pressure on learners.

The Key Drivers of Learner Engagement

What Works

What Doesn’t

Learning Environments Must Support Three Drivers of Engagement

Based on our work with learners and with institutional partners, we have adapted the language of Self-determination Theory to fit our context and best resonate with the language of higher ed and other learning providers. Learning environments must support three drivers of engagement that are at the very heart of Self-Determination Theory, as well as the Lab’s work. Every learner deserves to have these fundamental psychological needs met, and experiencing this fulfillment can foster well-being and deep, sustained engagement in learning.

These drivers are referred to in the Self-Determination Theory literature as competence, relatedness, and autonomy, respectively. In optimizing for application of the theory in the context of higher education, we have chosen an articulation of these concepts that has felt more intuitively accessible to our partners.

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.
All people require fulfillment of these same drivers to thrive, but the way these drivers will be best fulfilled may differ based on people’s unique experiences, circumstances, and identities.

Two learners may have very different experiences within even the same classroom environment. Consider how factors that are frequently cited as causes of college stop-out—such as time constraints, family obligations, and financial stress—might relate to learners’ sense of growth, belonging, and agency. Research for the Lab’s Single Moms Success design challenge has brought to light countless stories of how the challenging circumstances many single mother learners face can affect their engagement drivers, as illustrated on the right.

We can visualize satisfaction of each engagement driver on a continuum, from frustration to fulfillment. To optimize for learners’ engagement and success in reaching their goals, learning providers must aim to fulfill all three engagement drivers: growth, belonging, and agency.

Interestingly, as the Lab has worked with more than one hundred institutions and conducted interviews with thousands of new majority learners, the preponderance of deeper or psychological needs expressed mostly fall into these three learner engagement framework categories. And, even the more basic needs of affordability, food security, flexibility for scheduling, and child care, find their way into one or more of the framework realms.

If you were struggling to make the connection between this framework and how you might design new tools, programs, supports, or entire delivery models, the next section outlines a set of insights and ideas that we have gathered at the Lab from our seven years of work to put this framework into practice.

From Two Single Mother Learners’ Perspectives:

“Last year, I thought of quitting school. I had just moved out of the shelter and was on my own and I felt like my priority needed to be work before school just because I hadn’t lived on my own in about three years. I was really scared to go back to paying bills and working and taking care of the kids.”

This student’s nervousness that she might not be able to juggle school with everything else she had to prioritize to support her family indicates a frustration of her sense of growth and possibly agency as well.

“We had some medical issues and had to be admitted to the hospital unexpectedly. I emailed my teacher to let him know. He emailed me back, but I didn’t see it because there wasn’t wifi in the hospital. I had to stay there for a week because my son had some complications. When I looked at my grades, I had a D, even though I had an A before the final I missed when I was in labor. I went to campus with my baby to talk to my professor and he said, ‘There’s nothing I can do about it because you didn’t reply to my email.’ I had to wait another semester to get back in school because of the D that he gave me.”

This lack of understanding and compassion from her professor could affect her sense of belonging at her school, while the lack of options offered to her to continue her education could frustrate her sense of agency.
A learner’s ability to engage deeply in their learning is an outcome of the relationship that exists between each learner’s unique identity and their learning environment. No single learning environment will work for all learners. And, no learning environment is static, just as we as people are growing and changing, so are our environments and what we need to fulfill our needs.

We can visualize satisfaction of each engagement driver on a continuum, from frustration to fulfillment. This continuum exists from negative infinity to infinity, meaning there is no “great, we did it! Our work here is done” when it comes to supporting learners’ ability to engage with their learning.

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For this reason, when we visualize learner engagement within this framework, we are looking at the net fulfillment and net quality of engagement of each learner at a specific time. Frustration of a learner’s sense of agency, for example, will have a drastic negative impact on their ability to engage in their learning, even if their senses of growth and belonging are more fulfilled. All three drivers must be supported/fulfilled.

To the right, we see a simplified example of how a learner’s engagement can change over time. A learner might develop a mentorship with a faculty at their institution that deepens their sense of belonging. At the same time, that learner may lose their job, causing financial strain and income instability, which frustrated their sense of growth.

And, the changing of the fulfillment of these needs results in tangible changes in the thoughts, feelings, and behavior—or engagement—of each learner.

The Lab’s Learner Engagement Framework Explained
When a learner’s environment best supports their needs, the quality of their engagement increases.

It is critical to note here: this is a framework and a guide for how to understand learners’ experience and facilitate their deep engagement with their learning, which can lead to better retention, completion, and overall well-being for each learner.

Because learners’ experiences and identities differ, there is no objective picture of what an ideal learning environment for all learners looks like.

Rather, we must work to understand the learners in our communities, optimize for the fulfillment of their engagement drivers (each of their sense of growth, agency, and belonging), and create frequent, meaningful opportunities to keep learning from them about what’s working and what isn’t.

Meet Marcos
Veteran Ready for a Change
Age: 54
Race/ethnicity: Latino
Pronouns: he/him/his

Marcos is a persona that we’ve developed after interviews with hundreds of learners. His experiences are that of real learners we’ve talked to—his full persona is available in the appendix. Pulling from Marcos’ persona, we’ll walk through the real application of this framework.

This is one look at this person and one way to look at parts of what they are experiencing. These are our best bets, but these suggestions are not comprehensive for ensuring fulfillment.

I immigrated to the US from Mexico over 25 years ago and proudly served in the US Army for 10 years. Transitioning back to civilian life hasn’t been easy. Now I live with my daughter and her family and have been dealing with some health issues related to my service.

I started out my career as a physical therapist in Mexico. After I moved here I had to consider more opportunities for my kids, I had trouble getting licensed because my degree wasn’t recognized here. I joined the Army as a medic to continue working in the medical field and support my family. Since leaving the military, I’ve worked as a home healthcare worker, but it doesn’t pay much.

I want to become a nurse so I can keep building on my experience in medicine and earn more money, but I’m not sure how to make that happen at this point in my life. I want to stay close to my daughter’s family, have good benefits, and earn enough income to live on my own.

I contracted COVID-19 from a patient. I didn’t have enough paid sick days to cover my full recovery time. It was so scary. I’m glad to be back at work, but it’s painful to see my patients passing away.

My health is generally pretty stable right now, but sometimes I need a little bit of time to recover from a flare up and not to worry that it might be hard to find the time I need to take care of myself if my school schedule is too rigid.

Flexibility of time, place, and pace of learning could support Marcos’s sense of agency.

Growth
Ever since I came to the US, it’s been strange feeling like I have skills and knowledge that I can’t apply in my job because no one will recognize my degree and work experience from Mexico.

Giving Marcos credit for his prior experience and learning and showing how this maps to his progress toward his goals could support his sense of growth.

Belonging
I’m probably too old to go back to school. Me and a bunch of teenagers? Won’t I be older than all the professors? As much as I’d like to meet new people, I think I might feel pretty out of place.

Offering Marcos opportunities to mentor others and leverage his prior experience in other ways to contribute to his learning community could support his sense of belonging.

Agency
My health is generally pretty stable right now, but sometimes I need a little bit of time to recover from a flare up and not to worry that it might be hard to find the time I need to take care of myself if my school schedule is too rigid.

Flexibility of time, place, and pace of learning could support Marcos’s sense of agency.
Ideas and Insights to Support Learners’ Sense of Growth, Belonging, and Agency
While any two learners may experience different barriers to engagement, certain strategies may support growth, agency, and belonging for a wide variety of new majority learners. The following set of insights and ideas can inform practices that have great potential to support fulfillment of these engagement drivers for today’s learners, and in turn, aid in lessening opportunity and resource gaps that act as hurdles for learners to succeed. Throughout, we provide examples of how learning providers, including many the Lab has worked with, have applied these recommendations.

Before We Dive In

The learner engagement framework offers a lens through which we can recognize critical barriers facing different learners today, as well as opportunities to redesign systems and programs to effectively support them in reaching their goals. We see each of the ideas we’ve included here as a place to start, any of which could produce tangible, positive changes for new majority learners’ educational experiences, depending on how they are implemented. And just as true, there is ample territory to explore beyond the short list of ideas here in order to offer opportunities for deep engagement.

What matters at the end of the day is not just if a given institution offers a particular type of advising or stackable credential pathway or online learning platform; it’s how the programs and structures in place affect each learner’s experiences of growth, agency, and belonging that will make or break each learner’s engagement, persistence, and success. Staying focused on supporting these drivers of engagement—and on hearing directly from new majority learners about the extent to which they feel fulfilled in terms of growth, agency, and belonging—will help ensure that we are centering learners in designing toward meaningful impact.

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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 really don’t know what will happen tomorrow. I know that there will be times where I will be struggling financially or won’t know if my daughter is okay or my family’s okay. I’m really scared about the challenges that I will be facing, like, tomorrow. I just don’t want them to keep stopping me.

— Single Mother Learner

Food and housing insecurity, financial strain, lack of childcare, absence of reliable WiFi access or tech devices, and other basic needs barriers can impede a learner’s ability to devote time and energy to learning, or even connect with learning opportunities in the first place. If basic needs are not met, learners are more likely to feel like they won’t be able to succeed in their educational journeys, frustrating their sense of growth.

It’s not news that COVID-19 has exacerbated and normalized this experience for many, hitting under-resourced learners the hardest. According to results from The Hope Center’s Fall 2020 #RealCollege survey, supports for basic needs that many learners rely on have disappeared, mental health challenges have become more widespread, and learners need emergency aid beyond what has been made available. Colleges and other learning providers can play a vital role in addressing basic needs insecurities to support their learners’ well-being, and this can serve as an important starting point from which to design toward deeper satisfaction of growth, agency, and belonging for learners.

At Delgado Community College in New Orleans, Louisiana, at least 13% of students enrolled are single moms. As part of the Lab’s Single Moms Success design challenge, Delgado is rolling out a new holistic case management model to streamline access points for support. Their team will provide single mother learners with one consistent point of contact—accessible by email, phone, video call, and in-person—who can directly connect them with resources on campus and out in the New Orleans community, utilizing Aunt Bertha’s online interface to streamline this. You can find a more detailed description of Delgado’s pilot in the Appendices of this publication, including how it scored high on potential to support single mother learners’ sense of growth, as well as agency and belonging.

Suggestion 1

Start with Streamlining Support to Address Basic Needs Insecurities

If basic needs are not met, learners are more likely to feel like they won’t be able to succeed in their educational journeys, frustrating their sense of growth.
Offering learners optionality to engage in integrated work opportunities throughout their learning experience does double-duty: supporting learners in their goals, in turn deepening their engagement in their learning in real-time, and allowing many learners access to the sustaining income they need.

In our 2019 white paper, we called for a more intimate interweaving of learning, work, and life in response to the evolving future, where individuals will need to upskill more frequently to maintain in-demand skills. Pre-pandemic, a report from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University found that 70% of full-time college students are working—it is no surprise that learners who are parents, underpaid, or from low-income backgrounds are more likely to work while in school and are working the most hours relative to their middle- and upper-class counterparts.

Now, the pandemic has exacerbated and made clear the need for integrated and sustainable work opportunities. A reported 53% of low-income and working class learners have lost income from on-campus jobs that have disappeared, despite many new majority learners’ financial and family situations requiring that they work while going to school.

Two examples of learn-and-work models that have demonstrated success in the Lab’s portfolio: Xavier University of Louisiana, a historically Black college and university (HBCU) based in New Orleans, has introduced career planning and exploration into its first-year foundations course to prepare students to align their academic and career journeys through the Lab’s Career Pathways Initiative with UNCF. A second model, built in partnership with Goodwill San Antonio, Palo Alto College, and Alamo Community Colleges District, is a pathway that prepares incumbent frontline retail workers for middle-skill managerial jobs in advanced manufacturing and other growth sectors. Upskill SA! offers workers time “on the clock” to complete learning modules and proving-ground assessments based on actual work situations. This produces a culture of career development among learners from the beginning of their enrollment. Work-based learning opportunities like these can help learners see and feel their growth more immediately and tangibly, and the alignment with learners’ bigger picture career goals can further reinforce their sense of growth.

Many competency-based education (CBE) models focus on providing frequent, formative feedback that offers learners supportive insights about how they can keep growing, always offering paths forward toward their goals. Emphasizing seat time, high-stakes testing, and grades—rather than learning goals—has been shown to harm learners’ engagement and motivation: Learners worry that they cannot succeed and feel pressured or controlled, frustrating their sense of both growth and agency, and degrading the quality of their motivation.

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Shift to Competency-Based Education to Focus on Progress Rather Than Performance

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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 think a lot of professors just get used to hearing the excuses. ‘Oh, you’re homeless. Oh, you have children. Oh, you know, you came from another country, you don’t speak English.’ These are all the barriers that students face. But, [faculty] have heard it so many times. They just say, ‘Oh, okay. We’re glad you’re here. But you’re going to have to figure it out on your own.’ It’s frustrating. I’m not telling professors because I want them to pity me. I’m telling them because I need their help and I need them to give me resources or lead me through this challenging time.

—I Single Mother Learner

Increased reporting over the last couple of years has drawn special attention to the connection between identity and a learner’s sense of belonging at their learning institution, specifically for learners of color, first-gen students, and other learners who have been minoritized. A 2019 study identified this direct relationship: a sense of belonging, regardless of identity, predicts better persistence, engagement, and mental health for learners; first-gen and racially minoritized students reported the lowest sense of belonging amidst their peers at both two- and four-year institutions.

June 2020 brought to the forefront a call for antiracist efforts with racial uprisings and mass protests erupting across the country in response to anti-Blackness and police brutality. The following are a few key recommendations from The Education Trust that provide holistic and actionable measures to align your learning environment with antiracism, and in turn create a more welcoming environment for learners: Anti-bias training for the entirety of your institutional staff; hiring and retaining faculty and staff of color—more specifically staff that reflect the racial and ethnic identities of your student body and surrounding communities; restructuring admissions processes to de-emphasize standardized test scores and factor in non-traditional merits such as work experience; and creating language-accessible guidelines that set consistent expectations for communications with and support for students and families, ensuring accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

And, a true sense of belonging must move beyond race alone to address the intersectionality of learners’ identities—addressing the needs of a single dimension of a learner’s identity will fail in wholly fulfilling this engagement driver. Class, gender, sexuality, physical and cognitive ability, hometown, immigration status, and native language are additional shapers of our individual identity that affect how we experience power and oppression, and ultimately determine how we feel we belong.

A wide array of experts and resources can guide these efforts. Our favorite organizations to look to include Creative Reaction Lab, members of the Equity Pacer Collaborative, the National Equity Project, and The Education Trust.

A sense of belonging, regardless of identity, predicts better persistence, engagement, and mental health for learners.
Embed Space for Relationship-Building Between Learners and Mentors, Staff, Faculty, and Peers

Having trusted individuals who remain present throughout a learner’s educational journey can make them feel personally cared about, leading to greater persistence. Increased sense of connection to peers and faculty has also been shown to contribute to improved learning outcomes.

As part of the Lab’s Learners Transfer Pathways cohort, Miami Dade College and Florida International University have connected students with peers to support them in mapping out their transfer pathways, while Rust College in Mississippi has worked with the Lab to pilot a program that leverages college seniors as peer mentors who offer career coaching, career exploration advice, and resume assistance to students early on in their learning journeys. In Virginia, Norfolk State University’s Learning Communities Initiative, developed in collaboration with the Lab as part of UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative, gives first-year students the chance to live and learn with a small group of peers who share interests and experiences and to build strong relationships with faculty and staff. All of these programs have positioned members of institutional communities as key resources and pillars of support directly involved in helping learners design and move along their learning paths. The sense of belonging provided by these relationships can further enrich feelings of belonging if those relationships support learners’ needs for growth and agency, too.

Advising helped me a lot because I’m an older student. I went back when I was 30 and had been out of school for a while. I really didn’t know what I liked. My advisor helped direct me into the right career fields instead of just, like, taking classes. Because sometimes you think you know what you want to do and then it doesn’t work out.

Offer Learners Opportunities to Both Receive Support From + Contribute to Their Community

Feeling actively supported and cared about by fellow community members can boost individuals’ sense of belonging, which can be further enhanced when community members feel like they are adding to a network that is bigger than themselves.

As part of the Lab’s Single Moms Success initiative, Delgado Community College in New Orleans has launched a flexible online orientation course specifically designed for single mother learners. The novel course offers space for single mother learners to engage in academic and career planning, learn about relevant resources available to them at Delgado and in the New Orleans community, receive referrals to support services, and more. According to course instructor Shelly Planellas, “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.”

I have met plenty of other single moms at school. We’re here mainly to be an example to our kids, and we all share advice. We share advice with each other and we encourage one another when we can.
A Single Mother’s Story

Single mother learners in the Delgado community both give and receive support, deepening their connection to one another and their sense of belonging at the institution. As one learner shared, “This semester has been so emotionally tough on me. My first day of the Connect Success class, I probably looked like a mess because I had COVID. Then two weeks ago I lost my great-grandmother, who has been with me for my whole life to COVID. This was the woman I would go to for everything. She babysat me, bathed me as a baby, cooked me sweet potato pie—I’m used to seeing her every day. I told Ms. Shelly I wanted to give up. I’ve never lost anyone. I’ve been part of five living generations together, and I’ve never known grief like this. I was so nervous about my grades in handling the grief. This class is what kept me going. Ms. Shelly motivates, the other students motivate me, we motivate each other.”

Planellas showed the students in her class daily that she cared about them as people and that her priority was to support them in reaching their goals for themselves and their families. That support for learners’ agency and growth further deepened their sense of belonging as well, all of which came together to positively impact their engagement and their well-being.

Learners said it best:

“The class turned out to be a class I really needed. There were some amazing people. Shelly was so great. She broke through all my layers… Ms. P is everything. That class, I think I took it the most seriously. I got so much out of that class.”

“This class has been a mirror to my life because it made me reevaluate 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.”
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.
If I were allowed extensions to complete work, I probably would not still be enrolled for so long off and on. I am dedicated to bettering myself, but my children and their well-being will always come first.

— Single Mother Learner

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

Suggestion 1

Personalize Visible Paths that Validate Learners’ Prior Experience

Meeting learners where they’re at by recognizing and utilizing the strengths, skills, and knowledge that they enter their learning experiences with as starting points can make their educational experience feel more meaningful and valuable. Adult learners who went through prior learning assessments at private for-profit and public institutions persisted at 2.5 times the rate of those who did not do prior learning assessments, earned degrees at triple their rate, and completed more quickly.

Central New Mexico Community College (CNM), the Lab’s BadgedToHire and Single Moms Success partner, offers learners several different avenues to receive credit for prior learning opportunities to take exams and performance-based assessments, provide documentation of prior work experience or training, and build digital portfolios that showcase the breadth of their past work. CNM’s use of Edunav enables learners to clarify their goals and consider different paths through school in terms of time to completion, course scheduling options, cost, and more. Offering all of this plus an innovative advising experience that combines case management and career navigation, CNM focuses on connecting each learner with individualized starting points and paths that align with their goals and life circumstances.

The result? Learners’ sense of agency can be strongly supported, making their educational journeys more engaging, efficient, and effective in helping them reach their goals.
Since 1990, over 70% of college students have worked while enrolled, making flexibility in time, place, and pace of learning necessary for them to feel comfortable enrolling and to persist long-term. Ivy Tech Community College, based in Indiana, offers eight-week terms and flexible scheduling to give students more options for integrating learning into the rest of their lives. Ivy Tech’s Learn Anywhere model, designed and launched through the Lab’s Single Moms Success Initiative, lets students choose week-to-week if they would like to engage in their classes face-to-face or online either synchronously or asynchronously. Models like this that offer learners the ability to pause and resume their learning more seamlessly, and to complete coursework according to the schedule and location that works best for them can have a major impact on learners’ sense of agency. Designing programs and services that center learners in their decision-making indicates to learners that their institution cares about them and understands them as a whole person. As Dr. Sue Ellspermann, chancellor of Ivy Tech and a former single mother herself, notes: “This is about fundamentally redesigning our learning systems to meet the needs of underserved learners. We shouldn’t expect these students to work their lives around our systems, but rather we must redesign our processes, even scheduling, to meet their needs.”

The way that I look at it is if I’m taking an in-person class, I’m losing money because I can’t work that day.

Many new majority learners choose to continue their education because of a desire to advance their careers. Industry-aligned micro-pathways can support these goals. At the Lab, we are actively co-designing what these pathways can look like: a micro-pathway incorporates two or more stackable credentials that can be packaged as a validated market signal, connecting learners to employment in high-growth, family-sustaining careers. The Lab’s Community College Growth Engine Fund is investing in community colleges as they work to meet growing consumer and employer demand for short-term credentials. The Fund’s nationwide cohort of community colleges and their employer partners will create new earn-and-learn pathways to economic mobility, resulting in 18 employer-validated micro-pathways designed to connect low-wage and entry-level workers to in-demand jobs that pay at-or-above median wage and put them on a path toward a degree. Equally important, the Fund will create a roadmap for scale to reach every learner and worker in the country and provide them with pathways to economic dignity. Providing learners with efficient learning opportunities that result in tangible career and income improvements will help them feel more bought into their programs. Linking these career milestones into visible pathways that bear credit and include opportunities to specialize based on their interests will give learners an even greater sense of agency in their learning and their lives.
Section 5

From Inspiration to Action
Every college has a role to play, and many are working to play it already. Twenty-two percent fewer students started their freshman year last fall, 30% fewer from low-income high schools. We have a moral imperative to recognize and break down barriers that have long existed for new majority learners at every step of their educational journeys—and to redesign systems, programs, cultures, and practices so that they respond to and reflect learners’ lived experiences.

This framework is not just about designing experiences that new majority learners will choose to engage with—it offers a lens through which we can more easily identify critical challenges that systems have historically posed to these learners so we can offer them meaningful opportunities to shape their futures as they wish. COVID-19, the resulting economic upheaval, and the growing movement for racial justice have made this mission all the more urgent.

Each learning provider can use this toolkit in their own way to increase engagement and start to bridge opportunity and resource gaps for new majority learners, and at the very least, provide a structured process to walk in the shoes of the learners who are the future of higher education. From encouraging the development of inclusive, antiracist culture to designing flexible pathways to family-sustaining careers, the learner engagement framework is one tool to keep equity at the heart of our efforts, in the process better serving the learners of today and the future and contributing to healthier economic growth, both regionally and nationwide.

“The heroes who struggled for civil rights in education dreamed of a country in which every American, not just some Americans, received a good education,” says Michael Lomax, president and CEO of the United Negro College Fund. “It’s not too late to make that dream come true.”

Want to dive deep into this to take your impact to the next level? Reach out to the Lab!
Acknowledgments

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Creative Reaction Lab | creativereactionlab.com
Equity Design Collaborative | equitydesigncollaborative.com
Monday Morning Consultants | mondaymorningconsultants.com
The Education Trust | educationtrust.org
The National Equity Project | nationalequityproject.org

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.
Appendixes

1. The Learner Engagement Framework in Action: Single Moms Success
   A case study on how our partner, Delgado Community College in New Orleans, applied this framework in co-designing a new program model aimed at boosting attainment rates for single mother learners on their campus.

2. Four Research-backed Personas
   A set of learner personas based on seven years of research to understand learners most likely to be excluded by higher ed.
At the Lab, we’ve spent the last two years integrating key principles from Self-Determination Theory into our work to encourage a deeper holistic understanding of learners’ needs. To provide a concrete example, we see a case study from the Single Moms Success design challenge, where the Lab works with four partner community colleges to design pilots that could dramatically improve single mothers’ college attainment rates. Growth, agency, and belonging showed up as strong themes throughout interviews with single mother learners and have served as design criteria to push teams’ ideas toward deeper impact.

Throughout the Single Moms Success design challenge, Delgado Community College has demonstrated its strong commitment to integrating key principles from Self-Determination Theory into our work to encourage a deeper holistic understanding of learners’ needs. To provide a concrete example, we offer a case study from the Single Moms Success design challenge, where the Lab works with four partner community colleges to design pilots that could dramatically improve single mother learners’ college attainment rates. Growth, agency, and belonging showed up as strong themes throughout interviews with single mother learners and have served as design criteria to push teams’ ideas toward deeper impact.

Case Study

Delgado’s Flexible Learn + Earn Pilot

Elements of the pilot began to roll out in fall 2020, and the full pilot program will launch in fall 2021.

Growth

“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 wasn’t alone.”

“Online courses allowed me to still be able to do that. I wasn’t taking time away from my daughter went to sleep. So I wasn’t taking time to feel uncomfortable sharing openly with faculty, staff, and other learners. I was living in a homeless shelter with my kids. I couldn’t feel comfortable sharing openly with faculty, staff, and other learners. 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.”

Delgado’s Single Moms Success pilot will provide:

- Case management accessible both in-person and online
- Access to Aunt Bertha for streamlined resource referral and connections to support at Delgado Community College
- Orientation course specifically for single moms so they can build connections and learn about the support at Delgado Community College
- Childcare vouchers
- Financial assistance via special scholarships and financial aid workshops
- Transportation assistance through bus passes
- Robust, industry-specific career advising informed by labor market data from the Louisiana Workforce Commission and Greater New Orleans, Inc., the regional economic development nonprofit.
- Paid internships and apprenticeships, paired with industry-specific learning opportunities and regional economic development
- Proactive outreach from case managers, support staff, and specially trained faculty and staff about learners’ academic, career, and personal journeys, supports they can access, and how they’re doing

Belonging

“I’ve met a lot of students who are also parents, which made things a lot better because you know 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.”

Close relationships at school can make a big difference in single mother learners’ happiness and engagement and can help them better navigate the demands of balancing work, family, and school.

The holistic support model integrated into Delgado’s Single Moms Success design challenge has begun to break down barriers that often prevent single mother learners from engaging in their coursework. Many single mother learners face time poverty, financial strain, scheduling limitations, and immense stress in their daily lives. The relationship between education, career opportunities, and poverty for single mothers and their children has just high school diplomas. The relationship between education, career opportunities, and poverty for single mothers and their children has just high school diplomas. 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.

Delgado’s Single Moms Success pilot will provide:

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- Financial assistance via special scholarships and financial aid workshops
- Transportation assistance through bus passes
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Agency

“Online courses allowed me to still be able to work and still take classes. They’re the way for me because I could work on them after my daughter went to sleep. So I wasn’t taking time away from her.”

Single mother learners need the freedom to structure their school experience to align with their goals, life circumstances, and priorities. Single moms often return to college to change the better for their families, but like many students, they may not have a chance to do so. Delgado single Moms Success pilot will provide:

- Online courses for single moms to follow one another’s in Delgado’s mobile app
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Agency

“Online courses allowed me to still be able to work and still take classes. They’re the way for me because I could work on them after my daughter went to sleep. So I wasn’t taking time away from her.”
Four Research-Backed Personas

Taking time at the beginning of any design process to develop a deep initial understanding of your learners’ experiences, while engaging them throughout the design process, is critical in both designing a program or service that meets all stakeholders’ goals and fulfilling learners’ growth, agency, and belonging.

The first step—and the north star of human-centered design work—is to talk directly with a wide diversity of learners at your institution, and community members engaging with the service or program we’re designing.

Based on interviews with hundreds of learners and insights from the Lab’s work through projects like our Seamless Transfer Pathways, Single Moms Success, BRIDGES Rural, and Community College Growth Engine Fund, we created four personas that leverage the engagement framework. Nonetheless personas are not a substitute for consistent conversation and feedback gathering with actual learners at your institution and in your community. We encourage you to talk directly to learners and workers in your community as frequently as you can to understand their nuanced individual experiences and perspectives and to bring them directly into education design efforts.

The personas:

- **Brittany**
  - Age: 17
  - Race/Ethnicity: Black
  - Pronouns: she/her/hers

Brittany is a junior in high school. She comes from a family-sustaining career through becoming a first-generation college graduate. She has moments where I feel like I don’t belong in my college classes. None of my professors have been Black, and I think I’m the youngest person in there. I don’t really have any time to just be a teenager. Prioritizing hiring that reflects the community of learners served and embedding relationships in the high school and community is critical to understand Brittany’s sense of belonging.

- **Marcos**
  - Age: 54
  - Race/Ethnicity: Latino
  - Pronouns: she/her/hers

Marcos, a 54-year-old unemployed Latino Army veteran who wants to apply his work experience in healthcare through a career in nursing. He’s a senior in high school, my middle child in my family and love to hang out with my friends and play sports, especially baseball. My family has had a restaurant since I was a kid. My family has had a restaurant since I was a kid. I've been pretty bored in high school so am now dual enrolled at our community college here so can start earning some credits and taking different classes. I wish I had a map of my path to a career and could see how I'm moving along it. Embedding industry-aligned, skill-building pathways can support Brittany’s sense of growth.

- **Lissa**
  - Age: 30
  - Race/Ethnicity: White
  - Pronouns: she/her/hers

Lissa, a 30-year-old White single mother recently laid off and hoping to build a family-sustaining career through becoming a first-generation college graduate. I've been pretty bored in high school so am now dual enrolled at our community college here so can start earning some credits and taking different classes. I wish I had a map of my path to a career and could see how I'm moving along it. Embedding industry-aligned, skill-building pathways can support Brittany’s sense of growth.

- **Ray**
  - Age: 17
  - Race/Ethnicity: Queer
  - Pronouns: they/them

Ray, a 20-year-old queer Chinese-American college student feeling lost and anxious about his career prospects. I'm a junior in high school. I'm the middle kid in my family and love to hang out with my friends and play sports, especially softball. With so much work at the restaurant and for school, it's hard to fit exercise in. I like working but want to explore options outside of the restaurant business, maybe in science or engineering.”

It’s important to note that the intention of these personas is not to reinforce stereotypes or to make sweeping statements about the experiences of all learners across particular groups, communities, or identities; rather, it is simply to illustrate what a given learner’s experience might entail, to offer a “pressure-testing” tool for ideas, and to surface “voices” that you can keep at the center of your thinking as you proceed. To offer a “pressure-testing” tool for ideas, and to surface “voices” that you can keep at the center of your thinking as you proceed. For example, the personas bring them directly into education design efforts.

Taking time at the beginning of any design process to develop a deep initial understanding of your learners’ experiences, while engaging them throughout the design process, is critical in both designing a program or service that meets all stakeholders’ goals and fulfilling learners’ growth, agency, and belonging.

The first step—and the north star of human-centered design work—is to talk directly with a wide diversity of learners at your institution, and engage learners throughout your process as thought partners. After conducting interviews, focus groups, and other primary research, we’ll work with our partners to develop personas of different key learners and community members engaging with the service or program we’re designing.

Four Research-Backed Personas
When my husband’s abusive behavior got worse (one year, I managed to escape three times and have no idea where I’m going to start over. I found a new job as a receptionist at a hospital, but we’re living paycheck-to-paycheck.

I want to go to school for a few semesters before my kids are born but then felt like I really didn’t have time to work, go to school, and take care of one of my first person in my family to go to college, so the experiences I had were pretty isolating from most of my community.

Some friends have made comments and jokes about my Chinese heritage and the virus, which confused me and really hurt. My summer job fell through, so I’m feeling anxious about money and if I will be able to get a decent job. Right now I’m laid off within my first month. I’m working as a receptionist at a hotel. But with the pandemic hitting travel so hard, we’re struggling to put food on the table and am living at home with my family right now. I really didn’t have time to work, go to school, and take care of one of my first person in my family to go to college, so the experiences I had were pretty isolating from my own community.

I always loved school in the past, but I felt pretty overwhelmed with some of my classes in college. I’m doubting myself for the first time. What if I just can’t do math?

I’ve been stressed that it is LGBTQIA+ friendly. I would love to be part of all of this queer student community there and if the college made it clear that it is LGBTQIA+ friendly. I would love to be part of all of the students that I’m a single mom. People make so many assumptions about my family and me as soon as they find out.

I’m not sure I’d feel comfortable sharing with professors or other students that I’m a single mom at school and support her sense of belonging. Students that I’m a single mom. I don’t know who to talk to get involved. I think I would feel a lot more at home at my college if I had a safe home environment for my kids to feel like they’re not alone as a single mom at school and support her sense of belonging.

Proactive outreach from case managers and advisors to address Lissa’s basic needs-insecurities and connecting her with other relevant resources could support her sense of belonging.

I really didn’t have time to work, go to school, and take care of one of my first person in my family to go to college, so the experiences I had were pretty isolating from most of my community.

I want to be a nurse so that I can feel challenged and fulfilled long-term. I want to provide financial stability and help my family out financially, be a great role model, and work for a while. I want to build a career that lets me support my family, help my family out financially, be a great role model for my kids, and work on causes I care about. I want to build a career that lets me support my family, help my family out financially, be a great role model, and work on causes I care about.

I never felt like I fit in or understood. I would love to be part of all of the students that I’m a single mom. People make so many assumptions about my family and me as soon as they find out.

Intentionally created spaces for single mother learners – online and in-person – can help. I see how challenging it isn’t alone as a single mom at school and support her sense of belonging.

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I was the first time. What if I just can’t do math? I always loved school in the past, but I felt pretty overwhelmed with some of my classes in college. I’m doubting myself for the first time. What if I just can’t do math?

Flexibility is going to be super, super important for me with any classes I’m taking. My kids are the most important thing in my life and want to be able to have family homework time too. I’m looking to find online platforms for student community building could support Ray’s sense of belonging.

I want to build a career that lets me support my family, help my family out financially, be a great role model, and work on causes I care about. I want to build a career that lets me support my family, help my family out financially, be a great role model, and work on causes I care about.

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I always loved school in the past, but I felt pretty overwhelmed with some of my classes in college. I’m doubting myself for the first time. What if I just can’t do math?
I immigrated to the US from Mexico over 25 years ago and proudly served in the US Army for 10 years. Transitioning back to civilian life hasn’t been easy. Now I live with my daughter and her family and have been dealing with some health issues related to my service.

I started out my career as a physical therapist in Mexico. After I moved here to create more opportunities for my kids, I had trouble getting licensed because my degree wasn’t recognized here. I joined the Army as a medic to continue working in the medical field and support my family. Since leaving the military, I’ve worked as a home healthcare worker, but it doesn’t pay much.

I want to become a nurse so I can keep building on my experience in medicine and earn more money, but I’m not sure how to make that happen at this point in my life. I want to stay close to my daughter’s family, have good benefits, and earn enough income to live on my own.

I contracted COVID-19 from a patient. I didn’t have enough paid sick days to cover my full recovery time. It was so scary. I’m glad to be back at work, but it’s painful to see my patients passing away.

Giving Marcos credit for his prior experience and learning and showing how this maps to his progress toward his goals could support his sense of growth.

Offering Marcos opportunities to mentor others and leverage his prior experience in other ways to contribute to his learning community could support his sense of belonging.

Flexibility of time, place, and pace of learning could support Marcos’s sense of agency.

My health is generally pretty stable right now, but sometimes I need a little bit of time to recover from a flare up and rest. I do worry that it might be hard to find the time I need to take care of myself if my school schedule is really rigid.

Marcos Veteran Ready for a Change
Age: 54
Race/Ethnicity: Latino
Pronouns: he/him/his
To learn more about the Lab and to follow along with our development and application of this framework, please visit eddesignlab.org

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