About Education Design Lab

The Education Design Lab (the 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 process helps higher education leaders consider the needs of employers, using curriculum and program design as a gateway to make skills more visible to students and employers alike. The Lab also helps employers, cities, and states organize their response to the vision that hiring and developing talent based on skills (versus degrees) is better for employer ROI, for regions’ GDP, and certainly for learners left out of the current system.

About the Community College Growth Engine

Since its inception in the fall of 2020, the Community College Growth Engine (CCGE), a design accelerator facilitated by the Education Design Lab (the Lab), has engaged over 40 community colleges and systems across the country to design micro-pathways leveraging a human-centered design process.

Through this work, we have recognized commonalities among our community college partners and identified key questions most critical to driving long-term organizational change that benefits learners, employer partners, and the institutions themselves.

“Pathways that work for both learners and employers require intentional design. The Community College Growth Engine — with the support of Education Design Lab — is surfacing key design questions and best practices that should not only streamline pathways to opportunity, but also improve employment and earnings outcomes for those they serve.”

— Jason Tyszko, Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

“The Community College Growth Engine’s paper on the future of learning effectively maps a pathway for community colleges seeking to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the profound economic, demographic, and technological changes facing postsecondary education in the 2020s and beyond.”

— Lee Lambert, Chancellor, Foothill-De Anza Community College District (as of Aug. 1, 2023), and former Chancellor, Pima Community College
Community Colleges: From Crisis to Opportunity

The future of learning at community colleges is bright and full of promise. With a national spotlight on community colleges to meet the rapidly evolving needs of their key stakeholders — learner-earners and employers — the moment to design a more equitable future is upon us.

Today, there are a number of converging realities that are creating a perfect storm effect. How we respond to the circumstances of this unique moment will determine how well we can meet our collective mission to serve new majority learners:

- Steady enrollment declines accelerated by the pandemic.
- Demographic cliffs that are shrinking the pool of traditional college-age young adults.
- Mainstream consciousness questioning the value of the traditional college experience.
- Changing employer behavior de-emphasizing the degree and valuing demonstrable skill attainment.
- Transition to a skills-based economy requiring digitally discoverable credentials and verifiable skills.
- Rising generation of learners socialized in a world of unlimited and free online learning resources, newly buoyed with artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT.
- New and/or scaling competitors in the learn-to-work ecosystem.
- And the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution that will require a greater weave of human intellectual capacity with technology.

Given this perfect storm moment, it’s safe to say the future of learning at America’s community colleges is at an inflection point. If America’s most accessible higher learning institution — an engine of economic mobility for decades — fails to evolve to meet the changing needs of society, it will become a relic of a past American dream that grew out of reach.

However, if the next era of the community college system aligns the future of learning with society’s evolving needs — and centers the learner-earner — not only will these dynamic, public two-year institutions thrive, they will be the catalyst that facilitates greater alignment of the nation’s fragmented and slow-to-respond learn-to-work ecosystem.
Realizing the full potential of community colleges and advancing a new vision requires an intentional redesign of the learning experience that answers these fundamental design questions.

Together, these five questions have the potential to help us articulate a new vision where every community college student has equitable access to flexible learning delivery options and deeper career readiness embedded across the curriculum, with skills that are credentialed along the way and made visible to employers. An equitable future depends on our ability to ensure that not just one or some of these five design questions are addressed, but that they are, together, comprehensively part of every learner-earner experience.

Albert Einstein once said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.”

That’s why this paper focuses on presenting design questions that can help guide a more cohesive movement. These questions are largely based on a culmination of what we’ve learned with our college partners across the U.S. in the last decade as they challenge the status quo to create meaningful change within their institutions and communities. Consistent with the principles of human-centered design, learner-earners and employers, who serve as co-designers in our work with community colleges, have also informed these questions.

For individual design questions, we can see some thoughtful answers taking shape across the country, with various institutions leading the way in one area or another. However, an equitable future requires community colleges to meet this moment by ensuring all learners are guaranteed access to flexible delivery options and support services, and that skills and competencies are stackable and visible, ultimately preparing students to be career-ready.

This paper focuses on five intentional design questions grounded in the Education Design Lab’s decade of experience working with community colleges, employers, and learners along with examples and resources to support community colleges through this transformative moment.

Despite being one of the most complex public systems making change difficult, community colleges are leading the way with pockets of excellence, bursts of creativity and innovation, and a general willingness to meet the moment. That’s why we believe the future of learning at community colleges is bright and full of promise.

As is the Lab’s way, we invite conversation to bring diverse perspectives to the table. We welcome and need all voices in shaping what this future can be.
## Defining Key Language

**LEARNER-LEARNS**
This merging of learners and earners is to acknowledge we are in an era in postsecondary education where individuals almost always wear both of these hats. Seventy-five percent of all college students now work at least part time, and everyone else needs to “upskill” or “side-skill” for most of their professional lives. To not design school at work and work at school is to ignore this reality, and to not capture the learning in both places does a disservice to all.

**MICRO-CREDENTIAL**
A narrowly focused credential that verifies, validates, and attests that a specific set of competencies have been achieved.

**ON- AND OFF-RAMPS**
Due to life circumstances, learners can leave the micro-pathway and return back to earning the credentials at the right time for their personal situations and do not need to go back and start over on the micro-pathway.

**MICRO-PATHWAY**
Co-designed with learners and employers, micro-pathways are defined as two or more stackable credentials, including a 21st century skill micro-credential, that are flexibly delivered to be achieved within less than a year and result in a job at or above the local median wage, and start learners on the path to an associate degree.

**PORTABLE**
Credit, courses, and credentials articulated across institutions within a state, between states, and between agencies that are digitally accessible so that learners do not lose the credential and credits they earned.

**STACKABLE (CREDENTIALS)**
Part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build a learner’s qualifications and help the individual move along a path to economic mobility. Each credential that is stacked can be earned independently.

**NEW MAJORITY LEARNER**
Based on today’s enrollment numbers, and certainly population trends, the once thought “nontraditional” students are the new majority of learners today. College was never designed for students of color, those who are likely older, working while in school, or supporting a family, those who might be under-resourced, or have time commitments related to work or childcare that prevent a traditional route to college.
Five Questions to Shape the Future of Learning

Community colleges have been called upon to meet the rapidly changing needs of today’s learner-earners and industry partners after decades of struggling against outdated models and processes that no longer serve them. Now is the time to consider a new approach that meets stakeholder needs while propelling community colleges to the next step in their collective evolution.

These design questions are meant to drive community college transformation toward the future we seek: Let’s intentionally design the learning experience with and for learner-earners, employers, and higher education institutions.

- How might we make skills and competencies visible?
-设计可堆叠的路径，沿路积累可认证的技能。
- How might we guarantee applied learning opportunities in all programs, for all learners?
- How might we ensure learning is universally flexible with multi-modal options?
- How might we ensure all learners have equitable access to adequate support services?
In order to ensure an equitable and thriving skills-based economy, higher education institutions must help their learners visibly showcase their verifiable skills and competencies to employers. Traditionally, verified learning comes in the form of a credential such as certification, occupational license, or a degree. However, these larger buckets of education do not make visible the skills and competencies a learner obtains at each step of their education journey. The lack of explicit skills mapped to student learning outcomes leaves the learner-earner and the employer to figure it out on their own, further perpetuating a misalignment between higher learning institutions and employers. Transcripts, for example, list course titles a learner completed but say nothing about what skills they have demonstrated. It gets even more challenging if a learner attended multiple higher learning institutions or alternative training providers.

Ensuring all learning counts is not only critical to address long-standing inequities, but is also an economic imperative to better align labor market supply with the demand for a skilled workforce.

As learners advance on a learning journey, they gain skills along the way that are valuable to their career trajectories as well to their employers. A 2022 SHRM survey shared that 79% of HR pros surveyed said skill assessment scores are just as or more important than traditional criteria, such as minimum years of experience and degrees.

When fully realized, the learner-earner experience includes the following four elements.
Prior learning + skills assessment opportunities that seek to provide credit for noncredit course work and lived experiences. For working adults, the idea of starting from scratch when they have years of professional experience is a barrier to re-engage them. To do this well, institutions will likely need to alter their current systems or embrace new technologies to automate assessment processes for scale. The learner journey through this assessment process should feel seamless and empowering, encouraging further conversation with the institution to determine next steps.

Skillified curriculum with both technical and 21st century skills visibly mapped to contextualize learning in a real-world context. “Student learning outcomes” that are mapped from “institutional learning outcomes” represent the frameworks that traditional academe uses to ensure learning is happening and to shape their assessment of those lessons. However, students and employers don’t speak or think in the language of the academy and must figure out what skills these outcomes actually translate to.

LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE
The Lab’s XCredit work focuses on validating a learner’s life and working experiences as currency for future opportunities. Through these assessments, skills and competencies are validated and made visible in a way that makes sense to employers while supporting a learner’s sense of growth and agency in both educational and professional contexts.

LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE
As part of the Community College Growth Engine, Seattle Colleges used skillification to begin the process of translating their micro-pathway curriculum into language that employers can understand: skills. The Lab’s Skills Visibility paper offers a vision to reinvent the talent ecosystem where skills and competencies are visible to learners and employers.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)’s Credit Predictor Pro tool allows institutions and state systems to streamline and monitor the entire prior learning assessment/credit for prior learning (PLA/CPL) lifecycle, providing insights into advisor interactions with students, faculty credential approval, and what types of credit recommendations students are receiving.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
Skillabi from Lightcast can help institutions see how what they teach aligns with the skills and competencies employers are hiring for by translating course content into work-relevant skills that are recognized and valued by employers. This “skillifies” the course to enable a direct apples-to-apples comparison of the skills taught at your institution and the skills sought by employers (and the learners who want to work for them).
Learning and Employment Record (LER) is a digital record of learning and work that can be linked to an individual and combined with other digital records for use in pursuing educational and employment opportunities. An LER can document learning wherever it occurs, including at the workplace or through an education experience, credentialing, or military training. It can also include information about employment history and earnings.

Digital skills wallets ensure learners own their education and professional experiences. Education is no longer tied to transcripts owned by institutions. Unlike traditional college transcripts, a digital skills wallet belongs to the learner and is sharable to employers as a means of communicating demonstrated skills and competencies regardless of where they were learned or validated.

LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE
Pima Community College is partnering with the Lab to co-investigate the strategies and effort required for the school’s micro-pathway credentials to be integrated into the emerging LER standards as part of the Lab’s new College Transformation Network. This network focuses on continued institution-wide transformation that began as part of the Community College Growth Engine and other innovation initiatives.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
Motlow Community College is leveraging LearnCard — a digital wallet for LERs — to deploy learning records for the benefit of their learners. LearnCard is a robust open-source software development kit (SDK) and is also available as a free app for Web, iOS, and Android. The app can issue, earn, store, and share credentials of all sorts including: IDs, social badges, skills, achievements, work and learning history.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation’s T3 Innovation Network seeks to promote, coordinate, and facilitate this digital transformation so that: (1) all learning counts and is reflected as data in the form of Learning and Employment Records or LERs; (2) competencies and skills are exchanged like currency for equitable hiring; and (3) learners and workers are empowered and given agency over their data so that they can successfully pursue education and employment opportunities.
The demonstration of core requisite skills during an applied learning opportunity, including applied learning experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, and the like promotes industry validation of learner skills, which serve as currency into and for advancing in the labor market. These experiences also introduce learners to networking opportunities that are key to securing employment. Applied learning experiences address inequities in access to the labor market, as learner-earners do not often have access to these networks or the ability to meet people within the industries they aspire to work in. Along with validating skills and competencies in a real-world context, learners build relationships and important connections with employers that may lead to hiring or strong references for other opportunities.

In order for institutions to effectively design diverse work-based learning (WBL) experiences that meet the needs of both learners and employers, the following three elements must be considered.

How might we embed career readiness across the curriculum and guarantee applied learning opportunities in every program, for every student?
Employer partnerships focus on developing applied learning experiences that give learners the opportunity to demonstrate skills and competencies while building valuable industry connections. Learners receive credit and/or compensation for their work to support equity and access to these experiences.

Applied learning is built into every academic program, offering multiple ways for learners to engage based on their personal needs and professional goals. This includes getting creative about what applied learning can mean. Applied learning includes career-connected, employer-backed professional experiences that allow learners to apply skills and competencies to a real-world situation and should be scalable to serve all learners. There is an opportunity to push beyond traditional internship, apprenticeship, and earn-and-learn models that can create barriers to access in favor of designing more equitable applied learning experiences.

Micro-internships, for example, are short-term, project-based, paid applied learning experiences that offer more flexibility than a traditional internship. Micro-internships may include hybrid or fully remote opportunities which address some accessibility concerns.

**LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE**
In the Lab’s Community College Growth Engine work, the T-profile tool provides a skills map for designing micro-pathways. Using this tool, institutions and employers work together to identify and validate the 21st century and technical skills needed for specific jobs. The T-profile process provides the employer with an opportunity to think more critically about the job while giving institutions a template for building out skills-focused education and WBL experiences to support employer needs.

**INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD**
Prince George’s Community College designed Competency-based Education (CBE) micro-pathways that are 100% online and self-paced. PGCC got creative with applied learning: Employer partners serve as virtual mentors, who typically present a challenge, create a project, or just spend time with the learner sharing about the company.

Northeastern University developed a virtual internship program that focuses on technology-mediated experiential learning to address these challenges and broaden participation for traditionally underserved learners.
Institutions partner with employers who prioritize workplace equity. Institutions can support their employer partners to create more inclusive work environments for learners. Implementing applied learning experiences together is an opportunity to help employers grapple with employee experience and retention within their organization while developing services that support learners moving into the workforce in real time. If institutions provide guidance and insights that can help employers improve upon the employee experience, it could help ensure learners are supported through program completion and beyond. That give learners the opportunity to demonstrate skills and competencies while building valuable industry connections. Learners receive credit and/or compensation for their work to support equity and access to these experiences.

LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE
Offering flexibility for employer engagement is key to sustainable and intentional employer relationships. By leveraging the Lab’s Ladder of Engagement model as outlined within the Employer Engagement Guidebook for the Design + Delivery of Micro-pathways, Prince George's Community College (PGCC) helped employers determine meaningful levels of engagement in ways that made sense for them.

For example, PGCC invited several employers to serve as mentors by meeting virtually with learners every other week. The college intentionally did not include too many guidelines, but instead wanted to demonstrate their flexibility and appreciation of employers who could give this time to learners. When employers are unable to participate as co-designers for new programs, finding ways to weave their input and connection to learners into the design process helps cultivate lasting relationships and address their talent needs.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
FSG launched Talent Rewire to demonstrate the business value of rewiring talent practices and policies to meet changing demographics, improve outcomes for underemployed populations, and advance opportunity employment. Through engagement with employers and workforce partners, Talent Wire lends into the employee voice and centers equity in systems change within organizations.

Aspen Institute’s UpSkill America supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America’s front-line workers. They advance collaborative solutions that work for employers, employees, and communities, recognizing that shared value for workers, communities, and business bottom-line is the best strategy for long-term success.
03
How might we design learning opportunities as part of stackable pathways that credential skills along the way?

As of July 2021, 40.4 million Americans have left college without a credential of value, often with what are referred to as stranded credits that are difficult to transfer or stack, which can be a significant barrier to re-enrollment. This question considers the unbundling of degrees to create short, focused credentials that provide in-demand skills and experience for learners entering the workforce and incumbent employees, providing value to the learner more quickly and more frequently than the traditional model. Stackable micro-credentials built into guided pathways allow learners to obtain skills and competencies that align with their professional journeys in a way that provides ultimate flexibility to meet their needs. Through the implementation of this new model, community colleges are more nimble and efficient in their response to changing employer and learner needs. Rather than overhauling an entire course or degree program when the demands of industry shift, community colleges can easily target and modify specific micro-credentials and micro-pathways to address those changes as needed. Ensuring these credentials seamlessly stack toward a degree encourages lifelong learning at a pace that makes sense for the learner based on their personal and professional needs.
Pathways are visible, guided, and seamless for learners. ‘Guided pathways’ have been a hot topic in higher education for nearly a decade. While community colleges are making progress with a more structured student experience, the division between workforce development and academic affairs often slows or even halts progress in developing full guided pathways that lead to associate degrees and beyond.

This reaffirms the need to adopt policies and practices that ensure pathways are visible to learners, are well understood by the faculty and staff who advise learners, and are seamless to navigate from the learner perspective. Equally as important is the need to consider this from a system-level perspective to ensure learners who complete courses or credentials across multiple colleges within the same system remain on the guided path and can easily see their progress with a centralized learner record.

Degrees are unbundled and repackaged into short, stackable credentials of value that ensure all learning counts. These hyper-focused education experiences provide multiple points of entry into higher education and the workforce. Learners quickly gain employer-validated skills and competencies that prepare them to move into in-demand jobs that pay a living wage, while also putting them on a path toward degree completion. True stackability with a focus on equity means institutions have strong processes in place that award credit for prior learning, regardless of where that learning took place. If the purpose of stackability is to promote lifelong learning and drive economic mobility for learner-earners, institutions must be open to adapting new practices that support the skills and competencies earned through lived experiences and seamlessly transfer them into stackable credentials of value.
Micro-credentials are the stackable building blocks of guided pathways. Micro-credentials allow learners to quickly earn a credential of value that prepares them for a living-wage job in their area while working toward earning a certificate or degree in that subject area. In an effort to stand up micro-credentials quickly, they are often designed as noncredit courses.

This demonstrates the importance of a strong prior learning + skills assessment process that allows a learner to seamlessly continue on their education path toward degree attainment. A guided pathways model that aligns micro-credentials, certificates, and degree programs creates an education blueprint for learners that allow them to clearly understand the value proposition of each step on the path.

“Community colleges are uniquely positioned to power economic mobility for underrepresented learners and workers — but only if they meet students where they are. These design questions build on what we know works, from work-based learning to wraparound services, while addressing the gaps and highlighting the challenges of reform in practice. Institutions must consider these questions and move beyond traditional systems and structures if they are to meet the needs of today’s learners, advance equity goals, and support local economies.”

— Kerry McKittrick, The Project on Workforce at Harvard Kennedy School
Creating flexibility in course scheduling and delivery are necessary for retention and completion, as learners seek increased flexibility to ensure they can meet their family, work, and community obligations. While the demographics of learners have become increasingly diverse, the model of teaching and learning has not caught up to adequately address the new majority’s needs.

The Carnegie Unit is an example of a model that has experienced little change since its inception in 1906. Re-evaluating current practices and developing new ones is part of meeting today’s learners where they are and intentionally designing education experiences that make sense for them.

04
How might we ensure learners have options, that learning is universally flexible with multi-modal offerings?
Courses are scheduled based on learner needs.
We know learner-earners are working adults and often parents. They have non-negotiable commitments outside the classroom that, when forced to choose, are priorities that come before their coursework. In order to support learners, courses must be offered during times when working adults can attend. Courses can also be offered at different times through a semester to provide ultimate flexibility for a learner, depending on how their needs change over time.

This could look like offering a course for 8 weeks every Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6 to 8 p.m., or perhaps each Saturday and Sunday during those 8 weeks. It is easy to imagine the majority of learning on community college campuses happening in the evenings and on weekends in order to meet learner needs.

Course design aligns with duration and modality.
When considering course duration, institutions are starting to think beyond the traditional 16-week semester. Typically, the next step is an 8-week course that is a condensed version of the original. Empowering faculty to consider how the content can be taught in different ways to ensure an 8-week course is not overwhelming is critical to flexible curriculum delivery.

Shorter terms address inequities associated with the traditional semester-long course by allowing learners to stop out when something unexpected comes up in their lives without being derailed for an entire semester. This model decreases the amount of time a learner has to wait to step back into their pathway, promoting persistence.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
Rio Salado College offers 40+ start dates annually to create ultimate scheduling flexibility for learners while seizing the moment of learner interest. Learners can begin classes nearly any week throughout the year, with class sections always available and never canceled. When a learner is motivated to engage, or re-engage with an institution, the ability for them to begin that portion of their academic journey as soon as it makes sense for them supports their success and capitalizes on their motivation.
Think creatively about Carnegie Units. Consider breaking away from the traditional three-credit course and encourage faculty to collaborate across departments to design interdisciplinary courses that count for credit hours in multiple disciplines. For example, faculty members could design a single course that includes one credit hour of business, one credit hour of English, and one credit hour of math.

Reconfiguring courses in this way allows the learner to apply skills and knowledge in different ways while engaging with multiple faculty, which leads to a better academic support system. Institutions may also consider leveraging noncredit or alternative credit flexibility to engage learners in meaningful learning experiences that include industry-recognized credentials, along with the skills and competencies employers are looking for while putting learners on a path to degree completion using a credit-for-prior-learning assessment model.

“The one-size-fits-all approach to instruction fails to recognize that today’s new majority learners require flexible and relevant learning approaches. To build an inclusive learning environment that focuses on individual learners and their success, we must first remove the barriers that exclude people.

Strategies such as active learning, inclusive excellence, and equity-minded instruction have proven successful in removing these barriers and promoting learner success. These design questions drive the systemic transformation necessary to implement these strategies.”

—Landon Pirius, Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Colorado Community College System
Experiment with new and varied education models. Providing several ways for learners to engage with course content is just as important as flexible scheduling. Like scheduling, courses must be intentionally designed to fit the modality they are being offered through. There are several ways learners can complete courses including: synchronous, asynchronous, online, in-person, hybrid, HyFlex, and self-paced or Competency-Based Learning (CBE) models. Ideally, learners will have the ability to seamlessly move between modalities with each term as their needs change. A learner should not be designated as an “online learner” who can only take online courses, but rather, they should be able to choose modalities on a course-by-course basis to allow for ultimate flexibility.

---

**LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE**
As part of Pima Community College’s overall shift to universal design and universal access, the college is changing the way it presents content and organizes its website. Focusing on the different needs and priorities of adult learners, Pima has launched a new set of web pages specifically for their micro-pathways, called “FastTrackPima.” This website focuses on occupations available to learners upon completion, average salaries, available supports, and flexibility. Pima plans to merge its credit and noncredit programming into one comprehensive website that addresses all learner needs and goals and does not create a dichotomy between credit and noncredit learners.

“We have credit and noncredit learners together in the same classes. It doesn’t matter whether a learner is gaining competencies in the credit or the noncredit realm. Every learner is a learner that has value and worth, and we are here to serve them.”
—Ian Roark, Vice President, Workforce Development and Strategic Partnerships Pima Community College

---

**LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE**
Finger Lakes Community College’s Growing Rural Infrastructure Together (GRIT) program partners with local community organizations to bring career training to locations closer to the rural learners they serve. GRIT offers three professional career pathways that lead to living-wage jobs with a focus on convenient locations and scheduling, flexible modalities, access to technology and support, hands-on experiences, and affordability.

---

**INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD**
The Active Learning Institute (ALI), initiated at Front Range Community College (FRCC) of the Colorado Community College System, works to improve student success and close equity opportunity gaps. ALI focuses on outcomes rather than content and topics, empowering the instructor to act as a designer and learning facilitator as opposed to a content expert, with a focus on learners applying course concepts to real-life situations.
How might we ensure all learners have equitable access to adequate support services?

Beyond providing key social-emotional, wraparound services, institutions are now grappling with how to ensure equitable access and use of these services. Degree students and workforce students often have access to different levels of support. Creating a culture where all learners have access to supportive services not only encourages retention and completion, but deepens a learner’s sense of growth, belonging, and agency. This builds confidence and encourages a lifelong learning relationship with the institution. Once appropriate services have been identified, including those that address basic needs, institutions must ensure there is a long-term viability plan in place that is communicated widely and revisited regularly.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University is an action research center transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied scientific research, technical assistance for colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments and agencies, and strategic communications. The Hope Center believes students are humans first and that their basic needs (e.g., food, housing, childcare, digital access, transportation, mental health) are central conditions for learning.
Supports are available when learners need them. With the understanding that an increasing number of learners may be on campus during evenings and weekends, this approach requires strong wraparound services such as childcare, academic tutoring, and a variety of asynchronous supports to help learners succeed through completion. Consider implementing a variety of opportunities for learners to voice their opinions about services that would benefit them and provide feedback on current ones.

Methods might include surveys, text message polls, open forums, and conversations during advising sessions. When deciding how best to collect this data, be sure there is a plan in place for where it will be stored and who will be responsible for sharing it out and how often. Routinely analyzing scheduling patterns will also give staff an idea of when learners are on campus, and therefore when services should be available.
Services are intentionally designed for an increasingly diverse learner-earner population. This might include easy access to translation services on campus for learners who do not speak English as a first language and ensuring undocumented learners feel welcome on campus. Providing passes for public transportation or vouchers for childcare can help relieve significant stress for learners navigating challenges outside the classroom.

Advance an engagement framework through an actionable plan. Learner engagement has been shown to predict persistence and retention, academic performance, completion rates, student satisfaction, and career outcomes.

LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE
Several of the colleges in the Community College Growth Engine have created new advising and coaching models for learner-earners in noncredit programs, such as Pima Community College’s Corporate and Community Navigators and Ivy Tech Community College’s Ivy+ Career Link.

LAB INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE
The Lab’s Walk in My Shoes Actionable Learner Engagement Framework provides a roadmap to pressure test new programs, processes, or an entire delivery model for rethinking learner engagement to support today’s learner-earners in their growth, belonging, and agency. This framework is meant to provide institutions with tangible steps that lead to improved learner outcomes from both academic and support service perspectives.

INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD
Seminole State College’s Destination: Graduation is designed to provide students with the support they need to overcome barriers to continuing their education and completing their degrees. The program aims to increase the graduation rates of low-income students and student veterans by providing comprehensive, on-campus supports. Both student groups show an increased risk of stopping or dropping out for nonacademic reasons. Leveraging United Way’s 2-1-1 Information & Assistance Helpline, Destination: Graduation connects students to over 2,000 campus and community resources and emergency grants.

The Lab’s A New Role for Higher Education: An Actionable Framework to Drive Regional Ecosystem Alignment includes an ecosystem self-assessment, workbook, facilitator’s guide, and a step-by-step guide for implementing levers for regional transformation. This all ties back to a learner’s sense of growth, belonging, and agency which lead to improved academic and professional outcomes, driving economic mobility.
Support services are visible and easy to engage with. Offering a variety of well-thought-out services means very little if learners do not know they exist. Develop a layered communication plan for learners, as well as faculty and staff, highlighting what services are available and where learners can get more information. Further, faculty and staff at all levels would benefit from knowing more about the services available to learners and how to help learners connect with these valuable supports.

Innovations from the Field

California community colleges each have a basic needs center on their campuses where learners can seek support in meeting their basic needs. Most centers tend to help learners who are experiencing housing and food insecurity. Others offer additional support like paying for auto insurance, finding low-cost medical care, paying for internet, and applying for public benefits. The centers are the result of a new policy requiring every campus to hire a basic needs coordinator to begin establishing a physical center. Some campuses have long offered food and housing support and will now add to the resources offered to students.

"It’s been hard for me to figure out where I fit in at a college. As someone in their thirties who doesn’t feel like they’ve accomplished much, it’s hard to imagine starting a degree from nothing. I just feel like the deck is stacked against me.

How can I keep my job, take care of my kids, and continue my education? My kids deserve the world, and I want them to have a better life growing up than I did."

— Prospective community college learner
Thank you to the co-authors of this paper, Dr. Lisa Larson, Rachel Kahn, and Kevin Stump. Thank you to the members of the Lab team who played a part in the development of this paper from conception to visual design of the final publication, especially designer Mariza June Avila.

We want to thank Ascendium, Jeffrey H. and Shari L. Aronson Family Foundation, Citizens Bank, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Autodesk, Carnegie Corporation of New York, deLaski Family Foundation, Charles Koch Foundation, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, Garcia Family Foundation, the Beacon Fund, Walmart.org, the Walton Family Foundation, and ZOMA Foundation for each of their generous support of the Community College Growth Engine.

This brief does not reflect the position or opinions of investor partners.

We are grateful to all of the learners and employers across the country who have shared their experiences and perspectives with us and to the Community College Growth Engine design team members at:

- Alamo Colleges District
- Arapahoe Community College
- Austin Community College
- Bunker Hill Community College
- Chandler Gilbert Community College
- City University of New York (CUNY) - Borough of Manhattan Community College
- City University of New York (CUNY) - Kingsborough Community College
- City University of New York (CUNY) - LaGuardia Community College
- City University of New York (CUNY) - Queensborough Community College
- Colorado Community College System
- Colorado Northwestern Community College
- Community College of Aurora
- Community College of Denver
- Community College of Philadelphia
- Front Range Community College
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Lamar Community College
- Maricopa County Community Colleges District
- Mesa Community College
- Northeastern Junior College
- Pima Community College
- Prince George's Community College
- Pueblo Community College
- Rio Salado Community College
- Scottsdale Community College
- Seattle Colleges
- Austin Community College
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Pima Community College
- Prince George’s Community College
- Seattle Colleges

The highlighted quotes throughout this brief were sentiments shared by learner and employer partners from the colleges in our project cohort and from the colleges themselves.
Acknowledgments

We also want to thank those who took the time to review this paper and offer their insights along the way, including:

+ Kathleen deLaski - Founder and Board Chair, Education Design Lab
+ Landon Pirius - Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Colorado Community College System
+ Lee Lambert - Chancellor, Foothill-De Anza Community College District (as of Aug. 1, 2023), and former Chancellor, Pima Community College
+ Jason Tyszko - Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
+ Kerry McKittrick - The Project on Workforce at Harvard Kennedy School
+ Cynthia Wilson - Vice President for Learning and Chief Impact Officer, League for Innovation in the Community College
+ Haley Glover - Director, UpSkill America
+ Shalin Jyotishi - Future of Work Fellow, New America; Senior Program Manager, Burning Glass Institute; Fellow in AI, World Economic Forum; Forbes contributor covering workforce and education innovation

Say hello: connect@eddesignlab.org

Join the Innovator Network
Get an inside look on our work—delivered right to your inbox.

Learn more on our website: eddesignlab.org

Find us on:

LinkedIn: @Education Design Lab
Twitter + TikTok: @eddesignlab
Instagram: @educationdesignlab
YouTube: @educationdesignlab3080