Designing the Future Together
2023 Year in Review
Growth: That’s the first word that springs to mind when I think about 2023 at the Lab — our 10th anniversary year. But after reflecting on all we learned and accomplished, a better word is thriving.

Yes, the Lab did grow — our staff has doubled since 2022, and so has our flagship initiative, the Community College Growth Engine, which is now designing more than 100 micro-pathways with over 50 colleges in 14 states. And this growth is accelerating as we enter 2024.

We have evolved our model from working with a handful of colleges to engaging statewide systems. We are working on behalf of new majority learners at both ends of the education spectrum: from high schoolers seeking skills and credentials through dual enrollment, to adults without college degrees seeking career advancement through alternative routes.

We continue to center design on the learner-earner, from black and brown talent to single moms to the justice-impacted. Our work across the learn-and-work ecosystem has shown that our human-centered, equity-based design approach aligns the players in the system in ways that yield better outcomes, and we have been pulling together the data to tell that story.

In addition to centering the learner-earner in our work, we are also seeing the value of putting skills at the heart of the systems that connect the dots across the learner-earner journey, from career exploration to credentials to hiring and advancement. We have discovered that, while the skills landscape has been hard to navigate for job seekers, employers, colleges and other learning institutions, recent innovations and collaborations – along with the explosion of AI – have paved the way to connect the dots across learning and work like never before. Our
work this past year has put us at the heart of these efforts, and we are poised and excited to continue improving the underlying systems that support economic mobility through skills.

Our impact to date and our ambitions for the future have been made possible by the lifeblood of the Lab: our relationships. In 2023, the Lab forged new partnerships with three new funders, 30-plus colleges, and 26 organizations across the learn+work ecosystem, and we have led and participated in numerous collaborations with other organizations growing in the same direction.

As a systems change intermediary, we not only convene diverse partners and funders around big ideas ... but we also DO the hard work in service of the learner-earner, together.

We thrive together when we focus on a common goal: innovating and forging more skills-first paths to economic mobility, especially for the new majority — They need fast, flexible, and affordable pathways to good paying jobs.

Our passion for design and innovation reflects our recognition that we are co-creators in this work. We bring our expertise, experience, collaborative networks and sensibilities about how to create and transform. We design WITH (as opposed to FOR) those closest to the problem. We lean into wicked problems with a combination of fearlessness and shrewdness, a listening ear, whiteboards, and sticky notes to imagine the future we hope for together. We turn ideas into collective action based on evidence of what works. This hard work, flavored with fun and authenticity, is what I have learned in the past couple of years embodies “the Lab Way.”

Big challenges require big solutions. So our aspirations are big — we’re thinking macro. But just like with any successful change effort, we must start with micro actions and learn along the way, project by project, year by year — just like how micro-credentials can stack to micro-pathways and beyond.

We are sharing some of those learnings from 2023 throughout this report, which include insights from our work with skills-based credentials, rural communities, and the rapidly advancing technology that holds so much potential for centering people and their skills.

Would you like to be part of this journey? Reach out to us here, We’d love to hear your questions and ideas.

In partnership,

Bill Hughes, President + CEO
Education Design Lab
OUR MISSION

Education Design Lab co-designs transformative solutions for the learn+work ecosystem that center the learner-earner, resulting in increased access to economic opportunity.

In August 2023, the Lab team gathered for Home Week in National Harbor, Md. Most Labbies meet for the first time in person at these semi-annual retreats.
Top 7 Trending Lab stories in national media

1. USA Today: Some parts of rural America are changing fast. Can higher education keep up?

2. Dr. Naomi Boyer, the Lab’s Senior Vice President of Digital Transformation, joined a panel of experts for the Chronicle of Higher Education’s virtual forum, “The Transcript of the Future.”

3. Hechinger Report: Five community colleges tweak their offerings to match the local job market

4. The Chronicle of Higher Education’s The Edge newsletter by Goldie Blumenstyk: Building credentials that actually pay off

5. Work Shift / Open Campus Media op-ed by Dr. Naomi Boyer: What’s in your (skills) wallet?

6. Newsweek column by Mark David Milliron, President and CEO, National University: The Rise of the “And-Ers”: Retooling Higher Education To Meet the Needs of Working Learners

7. EdSurge column by Community College of Aurora President Mordecai I. Brownlee: The Power of Microcredentials and America’s Higher Education Dilemma
Since its launch in 2020, the Lab’s Community College Growth Engine (CCGE, or “the Growth Engine”) has supported 50+ institutions in designing and delivering over 100 micro-pathways: Stackable, skills-first credentials that can be completed within a year or less, result in a job at or above the local median wage, and start learner-earners on the path to an associate degree. The Growth Engine doubled in size in 2023, onboarding 30+ new colleges across the country, including the Montana state system, expanding the total number of colleges and systems engaged to 54.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE GROWTH ENGINE INSIGHT

As many of the colleges in the program design noncredit micro-pathways, it has raised the importance of having clear policy and practices that support both new majority learners and their faculty. For example, Maricopa Community Colleges (Ariz.) have created a Council for Alternative Education (CAE). This council is charged with driving alternative credit, prior learning assessment, competency-based education, and noncredit strategy district-wide in the alternative credential space.
In early 2023, 12 learners completed their micro-pathways at Prince George’s Community College (PGCC), which was part of the Lab’s first Community College Growth Engine cohort. PGCC’s INNOHUB (Innovation Hub) hosted an inaugural Pathways to Employment Completion Ceremony in July (pictured). Eight learners completed the IT pathway, and four completed a pathway in healthcare.

**MICRO-PATHWAYS TRANSFORMING LIVES: STEPHANE’S STORY**

“I wanted to share with you an incredible journey that has transformed my life for the better, thanks to the Center for Innovation & Entrepreneurship at Prince George’s Community College (PGCC). I discovered a program called Pathway for Employment, [which] promised an opportunity to secure a decent paying job in just one year or less by focusing on specific high-demand skills.

Motivated by the program’s description and promises, I made the decision to become an IT support specialist because I have always been passionate about computer science. I dedicated myself wholeheartedly to mastering the skills required, and to my surprise, I completed the program even faster than expected. But the real turning point came when the [center] organized an employer meet-and-greet event in 2022, [which] became a life-changing opportunity for me. I introduced myself to these employers and engaged in conversations that showcased my passion and expertise. To my joy, they were impressed and requested my contact information.

Fast forward a few months, and I received an incredible job offer. I have been with that employer ever since and now work as a cybersecurity analyst. It’s genuinely unique how my life has transformed in such a short period. From earning $15 an hour as a direct support specialist, I am now on the verge of securing a decent salary.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone involved in empowering students like me, connecting us with potential employers and fostering an environment of growth and innovation.”

— Stephane Fonkam, who completed a micro-pathway program at Prince George’s Community College (Md.)
Pima Community College’s Automated Industrial Technology FastTrack
A Micro-Pathway to Become an Industrial Engineering Mechanic

Validated by regional employers including:
+ Raytheon
+ GS Plastics
+ Industrial Tool Die & Engineering (ITDE)
+ CAID Automation
+ Roche
+ Tucson Precision

3 months, part-time
Offered in noncredit
7 credits apply to higher credentials

CCGE PARTNER VOICE

“The micro-pathways work has been truly transformational. The learner stories and testimonials would bring you to tears.”

— Dr. Ian Rourke, Vice Chancellor of Workforce Development & Innovation at Pima Community College
DATA COLLAB

Partnering to integrate enrollment and outcomes data for pathways

Initially formed to support the Growth Engine, the Data Collaborative for a Skills-based Economy (Data Collab) provides colleges with the technology platform and supports necessary to collect evidence of what works in the world of short-term, non-degree credentials. It includes a technology architecture, data governance structures, data flows, tools and coaching support to build the “data capacity” that leads to insights for colleges. In 2023, we deployed institution-specific, research-oriented and public-facing dashboards; laid the foundation for 2024 pilots that will connect micro-pathway data with wage and employment data; and a team of data coaches that help colleges improve their ability to manage non-degree credential data and use it to drive improvement and communicate impact of their programs.

EXPANDING OUR SUPPORT TO COLLEGES WITH DATA COACHES

Doing data right is really complex, and most colleges don’t currently have the expertise or bandwidth to do it. We spent 2023 understanding the challenges in collecting, storing, and reporting non-degree credential data. Colleges of all sizes, geographic locations, and data teams require support and assistance in navigating these challenges. We developed a Data Capacity Academy to address this need. It includes 1:1 support from expert data coaches, leading to systemic transformation of colleges and their capacity to handle this data. Growing list of partners includes National Student Clearinghouse, Georgetown, Burning Glass Institute, Credential Engine, Coleridge, Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center, and colleges.
The Lab’s BRIDGES Rural (“Building Rural Innovation, Designing Educational Strategies”) initiative sought to better understand how rural colleges might strengthen their capacity to serve as critical growth engines for their learners and communities. Three years of work with five rural community colleges culminated in 2023 with our insight brief, which paints a picture of what rural college transformation looks like when communities use an asset-based approach and embrace the principles of human-centered design.

Despite the challenges of distance and access to resources, rural communities have shown themselves to be unique and fertile ground for innovative solutions. Five areas for rural impact surfaced during the BRIDGES project: Earn-and-learn pathways; micro-community strategies; grow-your-own programs; community ecosystem alignment; and increased data culture and capacity.

**HOW MIGHT WE STRENGTHEN THE DATA CULTURE + CAPACITY OF RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES?**

Building on the initial BRIDGES Rural initiative, the Ascendium Education Group has committed funding for up to 12 rural colleges to join our next round of rural work starting in 2024. In the next iteration, we will go deeper into transforming rural places, engaging communities of practice in new design challenges and integrating them into the Data Collab to provide colleges the data and insights they need to guide that transformation towards expanded access and opportunities.

**BRIDGES RURAL PARTNER VOICE**

“I had a moment with the Lab when we were talking about human-centered design and **meeting our learners where they are.** That is like DEI on steroids. We aren’t thinking about people as groups. We are thinking about people as individuals.

I don’t see how anyone could argue with putting learners at the center of what we do and who we serve.”

— BRIDGES Rural design team member at Washington State Community College
DESIGNERS IN RESIDENCE 2.0

Building regional ecosystems to accelerate dual enrollment pathways

One of the highlights of the Designers in Residence kick-off convening was an equity-centered design sprint with students at Arlington Career Center, a public Career and Technical Education (CTE) high school in Virginia.

Expanding on the work of the first Designers in Residence (DIR) cohort and Accelerate ED, Cohort 2.0 will build regional ecosystems with the goal of creating dual enrollment pathways that are not only broadly accessible but also affordable, responsive to students’ needs in earning a family-sustaining income, and that lead to an associate degree one year out of high school. The second cohort of six designers launched in the summer of 2023 with an in-person convening in Washington, D.C., followed by the development of six regional design teams in five states: California, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia.

LEARNERS FEELING HEARD + EMPOWERED: ANAYA’S STORY

“Students have a unique perspective regarding the challenges and obstacles we face, and this [Education Design Lab] activity reinforced that. It was clear that everyone — both students and adults — were actively listening and wanted to hear our ideas. Having us, as students, be at the forefront of the conversation showed that there are people who truly have our best interests at heart and want to make things easier for us. It was incredibly rewarding to be in an environment where our ideas and stories were taken seriously. The conversation also made me reframe my perspective: I am able to be an agent of change and mold my future. Your willingness to support each student certainly instilled confidence among us to pursue our passions. There are resources out there to help me, and there are even more being developed.”

—Anaya Sinha, a high school junior at Arlington Career Center, who participated in a June 2023 design session with the Lab’s Designers in Residence
The Lab continues to design, test, and pilot approaches to assessing and validating skills gained through life experience. This all comes together in an initiative we call XCredit, or “experience credit.” In 2023, this work led to the launch of the Skills Validation Network (SVN), bringing together leaders from across the skills-based ecosystem to expand and prototype a set of new skills validation tools and methods.

XCredit Partner Voice

“Over the last three years, our collaboration with Education Design Lab and evolving global dynamics has broadened our horizons. We’ve come to recognize that the focus shouldn’t solely be on refining existing systems in higher education and K-12; instead, our mission has expanded to explore new possibilities and vistas.”

— David McCool, President and CEO of Muzzy Lane, a global edtech leader in educational simulations
Vsbl: Offers better user experience + self-paced option

Vsbl (Verifiable Stackable Bits of Learning), the Lab’s online learning platform, offers courses for learners to develop key durable skills, awarding micro-credentials upon demonstration of mastery. Employers and institutions offer vsbl to their learner-earners, where they can discover and validate their skills through interactive online modules, instructor-scored rubrics and auto-graded assessments. Partners can tailor the learning experience to the needs of their organization and learners. In 2023, the Lab rolled out vsbl 2.0 with personalized, self-paced (no instructor) options and switched to a world-class learning management system, allowing for an improved user experience. Moreover, the Lab has started integrating all of its learning and skills validation work into a single platform and architecture, creating a runway for future innovations.

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<td>in earned revenue generated across seven clients support 5,450 users in 2023</td>
<td>21st Century Skills badges awarded in 2023</td>
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Experience You: Using AI to make skills visible

Experience You — an ongoing T3 Innovation Network initiative in partnership with the Lab and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation — galvanized a community of data and technology vendors and researchers to explore how to use AI to populate and enable uses for Learning Employment Records (LERs). LERs are next-generation “skills wallets” that represent verified skills and experiences for learners and earners. Conducted as an innovation challenge program, Experience You solutions showed how to quickly and accurately translate prior education, work, and life experience into structured, machine-actionable data in the form of a LER, providing evidence of skills for those whose abilities would be otherwise invisible or hidden in the talent marketplace. Colin Reynolds, a Senior Education Designer at the Lab, and Bill Hughes, the Lab’s President + CEO, presented during the T3 Innovation Network’s Mid-Year Meeting in July 2023. In October, the team released its Phase 1 Demonstration Report, Empowered by Experience: How AI Can Generate LERs at Scale for the Current Workforce.

OneTen: Building employment pathways for Black talent

In 2022, the Lab joined forces with OneTen, a coalition of employers, colleges, and community organizations designed to close the opportunity gap for Black talent in the United States. The Lab’s goal is to create a replicable process that enables OneTen employers around the nation to build sustainable talent pipelines with the ecosystems in their region. In 2023, we optimized existing micro-pathway programs; created a proof of concept for marketing collateral that will be distributed across Growth Engine colleges; and identified two areas of focus for 2024 with solutions for employers weaved through them.
The Lab’s popular T-Profile tool is now a digital app

In 2023, the Lab redesigned its popular T-Profile tool — which helps employers to define job requirements based on the key technical and durable (or 21st century) skills for that job. The journey of the T-Profile – from a paper-based prototype to a Google Spreadsheet to now a digital app – reflects how the Lab’s innovation approach unfolds. In 2023, the Lab was able to conduct T-Profile sessions with employers to generate over 100 skills-based job descriptions, enabling us to conduct analysis, such as which durable skills are most important across various jobs.

We debuted an interactive Skills Simulation

In 2023, the Lab debuted a live, scenario-based tabletop simulation, receiving high acclaim at two conferences of industry leaders, answering this design question: How might a community make skills visible leading to employment for opportunity seekers and a talent pool for employers? The Skills Simulation puts a diverse set of stakeholders together around the table – colleges, employers, job seekers and workforce agencies. The simulations have consistently unlocked deeper insights for participants into how effective ecosystems work and why ineffective ones don’t. The Lab has now been invited to host the simulation at multiple events in 2024.
Top 7 Presentations

In 2023, the Lab team presented over 30 sessions or virtual events at premier conferences across the learn + work ecosystem, including:

**ASU+GSV Summit:** Lab President + CEO Bill Hughes joined the panel, *LEGO Towers, Not Ivory: The Power and Promise of Stackable Credentials in Higher Ed*, which was moderated by Inside Higher Ed editor Doug Lederman. The Lab also led an invite-only session on Redesigning the Resume with Opportunity@Work.

**SHEEO Higher Education Policy Conference:** Dr. Leslie Daugherty, the Lab’s Head of Design Programs, and TJ Bliss, Chief Academic Officer at Idaho State Board of Education, led the session, “Pop-Up Think Tank: How Should We Respond to Growing Public Opposition to Higher Education?” In early 2024, they co-authored a related op-ed in RealClearEducation: *With Higher Education on Trial, Policy Changes May Be the Only Path to a Winning Case*.

**CBExchange:** The Lab’s Dr. Naomi Boyer (left) and Dr. Tara Laughlin during the “groovy” CBExchange conference, where they led an interactive Skills Simulation session on “Building Economic Vitality through a Skills Ecosystem.”
U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation / T3 Innovation Network’s Mid-Year Meeting: The Experience You Demonstration at the T3 Innovation Network’s Mid-Year Meeting featured Colin Reynolds, a Senior Education Designer at the Lab), and Bill Hughes, the Lab’s President + CEO.

1EdTech’s annual Digital Credentials Summit: Labbies including Dr. Lisa Larson, Dr. Naomi Boyer, Dr. Tara Laughlin, and Lab Founder and Board Chair Kathleen deLaski, joined many of our innovative partners to present several sessions about micro-credentials, micro-pathways, and skills-based hiring. Our partner panelists included (from left): Dr. Falecia Williams, President of Prince George’s Community College; Dr. Kate Smith, President of Rio Salado College; Dr. Mordecai Brownlee, President of Community College of Aurora; Dr. Rufus Glasper, President and CEO of League for Innovation in the Community College; and Dr. Rick Aman, President of College of Eastern Idaho.

Digital Credentials Summit: Brian LaDuca (University of Dayton) (left) and Dr. Naomi Boyer, Senior Vice President of Digital Transformation at the Lab, during their panel discussion about skills-based hiring with Australia-based Edalex and the University of Melbourne.

JFF Horizons: Lab President + CEO Bill Hughes (left), Deloitte Consulting Principal Steve Hatfield, and Chike Aguh, former Labby and Chief Innovation Officer at the U.S. Dept. of Labor during the panel presentation, “Designing a Future That Works.”
New Publications

Transforming Community Colleges
5 Design Questions to Shape the Future of Learning
June 2023 | Version 1.0

Transforming Community Colleges: 5 Design Questions to Shape the Future of Learning (download)

Rural Revival
BRIDGES Rural College Transformation Insights
November 2023 | Version 1.0

Rural Revival: BRIDGES Rural College Transformation Insights (download)

Design Insights
Early Lessons in Validating Skills + Lived Experiences
September 2023 | Version 1.0

Design Insights: Early Lessons in Validating Skills and Lived Experiences (download)

Experience You
Phase 1 Demonstration Report

Empowered by Experience: How AI Can Generate LERs at Scale for the Current Workforce (download)
MORE RESOURCES

In 2023, the Lab produced 35+ blog posts, six video podcasts, and additional thought leadership resources beyond the publications listed on Page 16–17, including Market Scan: Skills Validation Methods and a Glossary of Key Terms + Concepts in Skills Validation.
Our Partners

2023 Funders
+ Arapahoe Community College (DOL SCCTG Grant)
+ Ascendium Education Group
+ The Autodesk Foundation
+ Axim Collaborative
+ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
+ Carnegie Corporation of New York
+ Caterpillar Foundation
+ Charles Koch Foundation
+ Citizens Bank
+ Colorado Community College System
+ deLaski Family Foundation
+ Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation
+ ECMC Foundation
+ Strada Education Network
+ Walmart
+ Walton Family Foundation

New ecosystem partners in 2023
+ Accelerate Montana
+ American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACROA)
+ Burning Glass Institute (BGI)
+ Coleridge Institute’s Administrative Data Research Facility (ADRF) via the Democratizing our Data Challenge
+ Education Quality Outcome Standards (EQOS)
+ Georgetown University’s Massive Data Institute
+ Harvard’s Project on Workforce Higher Learning Commission
+ Markle Foundation
+ New America
+ Opportunity@Work
+ Orlando Economic Partnership
+ SHRM Foundation
+ Skills Validation Network members
+ UPCEA, The Online and Professional Education Association
+ U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Say hello: connect@eddesignlab.org

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