

Designers in Residence 2.0: Accelerating Pathways

Higher Ed Leaders as Regional Transformation Agents

June 2023 - November 2024

Education Design Lab

What if students in every high school had the opportunity to take an additional year of courses related to a career of their interest, earn enough college credits to finish an associate degree by year 13, and be well-prepared for a great job or further education toward a bachelor's degree - all at no cost?

[Designers in Residence 2.0: Accelerating Pathways](#) connects learning from Accelerate ED and Designers in Residence 1.0 to accelerate pathways for low-income students to earn an associate degree by one year from high school graduation. This cohort brings together postsecondary leaders to build and enhance their regional ecosystem teams to design and activate accelerated guided pathways.

The Challenge

Today, our K-12 and postsecondary systems fail to support upwards of 60% of Black, Latino, and/or students from families with low incomes to enroll and persist into their second year of college. The COVID-19 pandemic has also amplified many underlying inequities and trends. Amidst a pandemic-induced recession, [the connection between social mobility and postsecondary credentials](#) continues to strengthen. At the same time, the pandemic has heightened existing barriers to postsecondary entry, resulting in a plunge in initial postsecondary enrollment for the high school class of 2020, particularly within two-year institutions. Concerns not only about affordability but also the need to provide family-supporting income, have grown. These concerns, combined with low [postsecondary student success rates](#), lead students to question the value and relevance of continued education.

There are many efforts in place to accelerate innovation and create new, more accessible pathways. Early College and P-TECH high schools have shown promising results, demonstrating that it is possible for students to accelerate credential completion. Likewise, more students are enrolling in dual enrollment classes and career and technical education (CTE) is seeing a resurgence in both interest and innovation. On the postsecondary side, [guided pathways reforms](#) are creating career-aligned, coherent programs of study. And, driven by the increasing scope of digital delivery of postsecondary education, innovators are developing new, ["hybrid college" models](#) for students' 13th year, which are tailored to support students who have previously not been well-served by traditional institutions.

Despite these advancements, many students remain unable to access the traditional high school to the postsecondary pathway. Thus, we also need to build new, [accelerated, high-value pathways](#) that are explicitly designed to support students for whom the traditional pathways are not working. These new pathways must be broadly accessible to students across achievement levels, affordable and responsive to students' needs to earn family-supporting income more quickly, explicitly aligned with high-wage, high-growth occupations, and supportive of students across academic, career, and social-emotional domains.

The Opportunity

The Lab is seeking senior leaders from up to 11 postsecondary institutions to participate in the Designers in Residence 2.0: Accelerating Pathways to build and enhance their regional ecosystem teams to design and activate K12-to-Career accelerated guided pathways. Designers will provide rich user testing learnings and recommendations to improve and iterate ecosystem tools available (developed by the Lab and others) and surface the need for new tools to meet accelerated guided pathways.

Over 18 months (June 2023 - November 2024), designers in residence 2.0 will work with the Lab to

- Build their capacity to serve as regional transformation agents to align K-12, postsecondary, and workforce ecosystems;
- Establish ongoing teams representing all regional stakeholders;
- Learn human-centered design
- Co-lead design sessions with regional teams to build a sustainable, effective education to workforce ecosystem;
- Provide rich user testing feedback on ecosystem alignment and other transformation tools.

This community will leverage design principles, blueprint for scale, and other elements designed to support learners from Black, Latino, and low-income backgrounds to complete an associate degree by one year after high school graduation.

The Design Question

How might we strengthen our role as facilitators of regional design teams, to create dual enrollment pathways for BIPOC and students from low-income backgrounds, to earn an associate degree or credential one year from high school graduation?

What is a Regional Ecosystem Design Team?

At the Lab, we define regional ecosystems as regionally-focused, inter-industry, K-12, and higher education partnerships with centralized infrastructure, a shared agenda, consistent communication, and alignment across participating partners (adapted from Stanford Social Innovation Review on Collective Impact).

Background

Designers in Residence 1.0

In 2021, 11 visionary thinkers and doers who are leaders in postsecondary across the country spent 10 months as Designers in Residence to envision the role of higher education to be regional change agents to close economic and racial opportunity gaps. In partnership with the Lab, the first cohort of Designers in Residence developed two resources for higher education and ecosystem leaders to start aligning regional stakeholders and partners toward building a truly equitable future.

- **Resource #1 - Ecosystem Self Assessment:** A tool for leaders of community-based organizations, education institutions, and workforce development agencies who seek to align their ecosystem with an equitable future state in work, vision, and goals. The Self-Assessment is designed to catalyze conversations between partners and stakeholders, plus provides space to prioritize goals and track the next steps.
- **Resource #2 - First Steps to Regional Transformation:** An interactive resource and actionable framework that offers steps in implementing three levers for regional transformation. This tool offers inquiry, ideas, and actions as first steps to build towards the elements of the future state that higher education institutions, partners, and stakeholders have collectively identified as priorities.

Accelerate ED

To accelerate paths to economic opportunity and mobility for students who have been historically marginalized and to reverse the negative impacts of the pandemic, large-scale change must occur in how K-12 systems, higher education institutions, and employers work together to design pathway systems that minimize transition hurdles and maximize support for all students. The [Accelerate ED](#) initiative supported community partnerships that brought together the relevant actors - at the city, county, or state level - that have begun this work together and have the appetite to tackle the challenging cross-system design work needed to deliver accelerated postsecondary pathways to young people at scale. The initiative included an initial cohort of 12 design teams comprised of cross-sector partnerships spanning K-12, higher education institutions, workforce actors at the city, county, and state levels, and community-based organizations.

Designers in Residence 2.0: Accelerating Pathways is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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