Education Design Lab
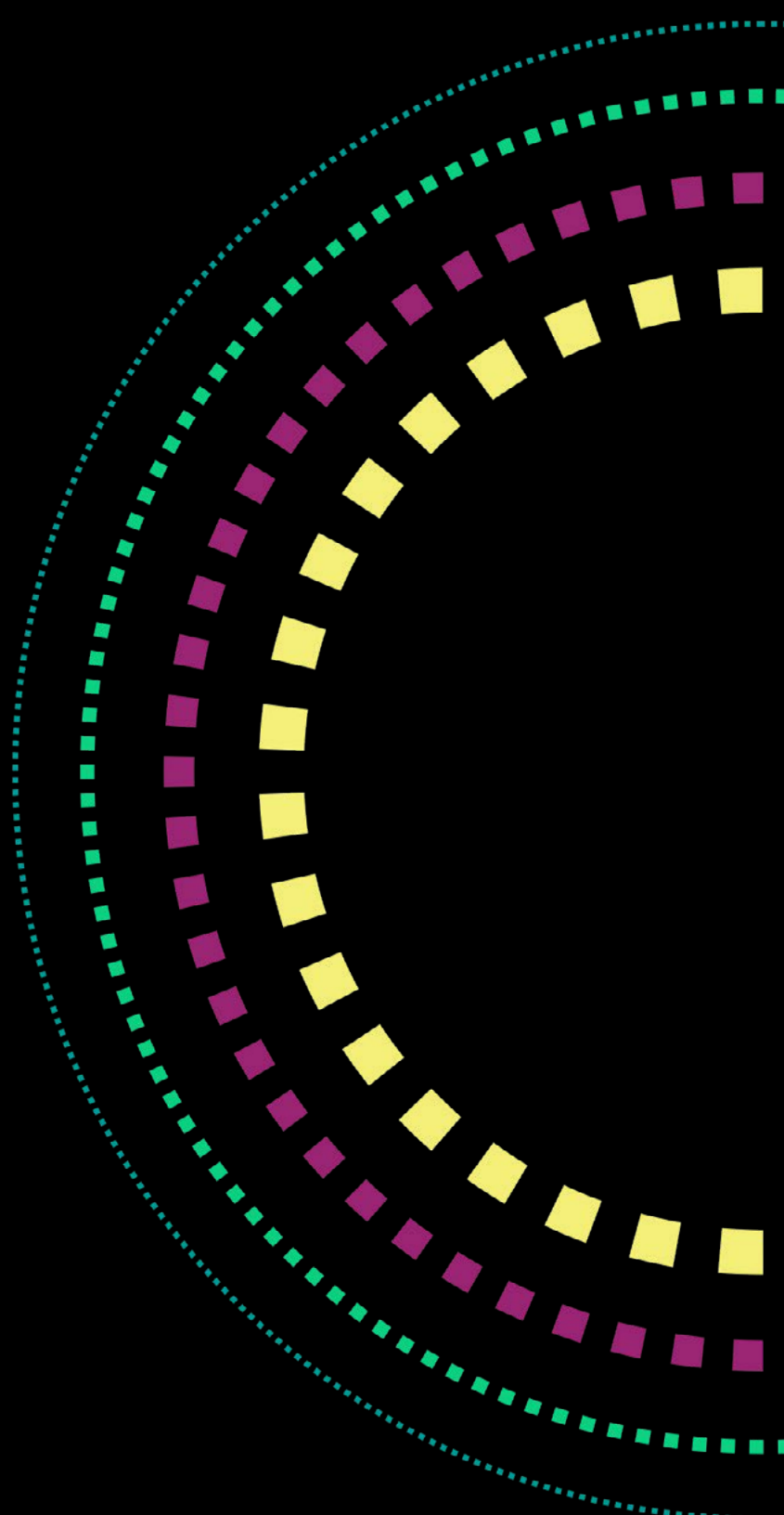
Accelerating Pathways

Early Process Insights from Designers in Residence 2.0

Design Insights – an Education Design Lab publication series

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About Education Design Lab and Design Insights Publication Series

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.

Design Insights is a publication series designed to share insights from initiatives led and supported by the Lab as part of the Learner Revolution. This series offers a glimpse into the Lab's human-centered design approach to make learning visible, portable, affordable, flexible, and relevant.

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How might we strengthen our leadership role to better drive regional ecosystem alignment for Black, Latino, and students from low-income backgrounds to earn an associate degree one year from high school graduation?

Approximately 82% of public high schools in the country provide dual enrollment coursework. This widespread availability of dual enrollment holds significant promise in addressing disparities in college access and degree completion across different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, despite its potential to promote equity, the current conventional approach to dual enrollment tends to perpetuate existing inequities in the transition from high school to college. Alarmingly, around 80% of school districts exhibit racial disparities in access to dual enrollment opportunities. (Fink, 2021).

The Education Design Lab (the Lab) has kicked off the Designers in Residence 2.0: Accelerating Pathways (DIR 2.0) project to explicitly **design** accelerated **dual enrollment** pathways supporting students for whom the traditional pathways are not working. This project builds on the work of Accelerate ED, a national community supporting multi-tiered efforts to build and scale pathways.

These new pathways must be:

- broadly accessible to students across achievement levels
- affordable and responsive to students' needs in earning a family-supporting income
- explicitly aligned with high-wage and high-growth occupations
- and supportive of students across academic, career, and social-emotional domains.

The purpose of this Design Insights Brief is to provide a glimpse into the 18-month journey (June 2023 to November 2024) with the Designers in Residence after a deliberate planning and preparation phase. This brief offers insights into the design choices for the planning process and how program success will be evaluated. The Lab is invested in this project as we work with educators and workforce groups to design, implement, and scale equitable approaches that put today's learners on a trajectory toward meaningful careers and higher wage earnings.

DESIGN
The intention and unintentional impact behind an outcome. (*Sourced from Creative Reaction Lab*)

DUAL ENROLLMENT
For the purposes of this insights brief, we define dual enrollment as college classes taken by high school students through a partnership with a college. While programs may also be called "dual credit" or "concurrent enrollment," the term dual enrollment encompasses all of these options. Because of state and institutional policies, our designers may define dual enrollment differently. (*From the Dual Enrollment Playbook*)

Leveraging their diverse institutional backgrounds and years of collective expertise, this second cohort of Designers in Residence will champion the efforts of regional ecosystem teams to design and activate K12-to-Career accelerated guided pathways.

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Early Process Design Insights

The following three key insights were used to design this project and are being evaluated through the design arc which will affirm or challenge them. The hope is that this work will drive **equity** and innovation in the design process and in dual enrollment pathways in the six regions where the **designers** are located.

DESIGNER
Anyone who has agency to make a decision, however small, that will impact a group of people or the environment. Every decision we make has an impact on equity. *(Sourced from Creative Reaction Lab)*

EQUITY
When we close economic, resource, and opportunity gaps across the learn-to-work ecosystem, outcomes are not predictable based on someone's identities. Equity is also "a process whereby we explicitly value people of color and low-income communities to achieve the outcome we seek."* *(Adapted from Creative Reaction Lab's "Equity-centered Community Design Field Guide" and *the Stanford Social Innovation Review)*

DESIGN INSIGHT #1

To achieve equity, the design process must center learners and families, since they are most proximate to the problem.

DESIGN INSIGHT #2

Addressing complex problems requires purposeful partnerships and stakeholder engagement.

DESIGN INSIGHT #3

Supporting the designers as whole people allows them to bring their best selves to their roles and align their personal values to their professional responsibilities.

Design Insight #1

To achieve equity, the design process must center learners and families, since they are most proximate to the problem.

One of the key learnings that has emerged during the planning process of this design project is the significance of centering learners and families. This insight recognizes that students are the primary stakeholders and beneficiaries of any educational initiative.

Centering learners and families involves sharing decision-making power, actively seeking their input, and valuing their voices.

Equity-centered design is a process and methodology that prioritizes fairness, inclusivity, and justice in the development of products, services, and systems. It recognizes that traditional design processes often perpetuate and reinforce existing inequities and disparities in society. In an equity-centered design process, designers actively design with those closest to the problem we hope to solve. By centering equity, the design process strives to create solutions that are accessible, inclusive, and empower all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or abilities.

EQUITY-CENTERED DESIGN
Problem-solving methodology that combines structures and processes from design thinking with constant, intentional focus on equity and inclusion in process and product, directly and consistently involving people most deeply impacted by problems in decision-making to work toward changes that will support more equitable and just futures. (*Adapted from Deloitte*)

To provide the designers with a real experience implementing equity-centered design, the Lab visited the Arlington Career Center in Arlington, Virginia, during the DIR kick-off in June 2023. Their students were invited to work together with the designers through a collaborative design process that ensured the students' voices and aspirations were heard and centered in shaping the future of their education and career pathways.

One junior student, Ananya Sinha, reflects on the experience:

"Students have a unique perspective regarding the challenges and obstacles we face, and this activity reinforced that. It was clear that everyone — both students and adults — were actively listening and wanted to hear our ideas. 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.

Additionally, listening to other students' opinions and ideas showed me that there isn't always a right or wrong answer, but a range of perspectives that contribute to the issue at hand. It was really great to see a lot of diverse faces sharing their experiences."
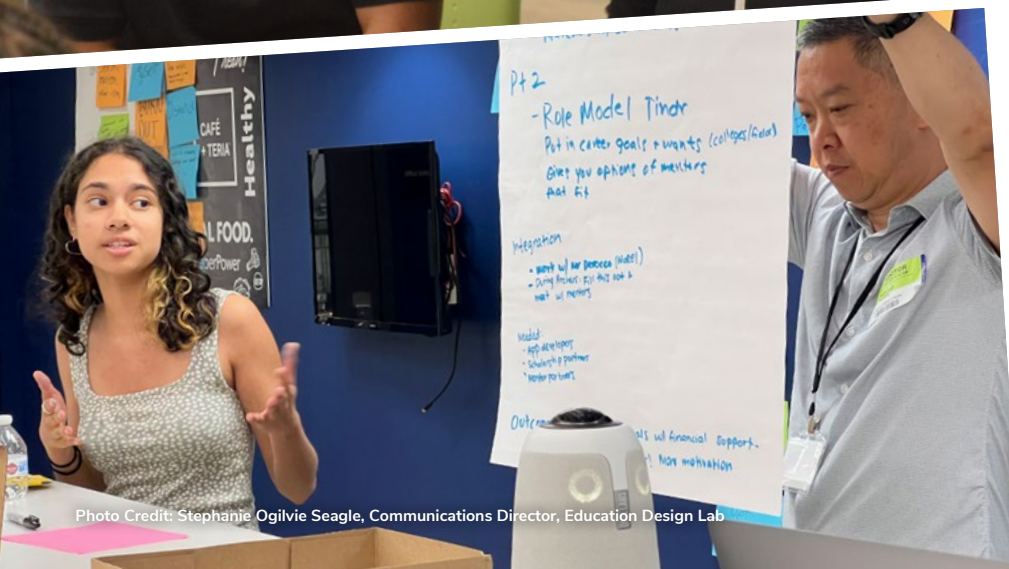
Photo Credit: Stephanie Ogilvie Seagle, Communications Director, Education Design Lab

Design Insight #2

Addressing complex problems requires purposeful partnerships and stakeholder engagement.

Another key insight that has surfaced during the early stages of this design project is the importance of purposeful partnerships. For the designers who represent higher education institutions, collaborating with diverse stakeholders, such as K-12 schools and districts, employers, community organizations, and policymakers, can significantly enhance the impact and sustainability of the project. Purposeful partnerships involve identifying shared goals, aligning strategies, and leveraging collective expertise and resources.

Regional ecosystems and **collective impact** refer to the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders working together toward a shared goal and are instrumental in addressing complex and systemic challenges that require diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources. By bringing together a range of stakeholders, collective impact fosters a collaborative environment where different viewpoints are valued, and shared wisdom is harnessed.

REGIONAL ECOSYSTEM
The Lab defines regional ecosystems as regionally-focused, inter-industry partnerships with centralized infrastructure, a shared agenda, consistent communication, and alignment across participating partners. (*Adapted from Stanford Social Innovation Review on Collective Impact*)

COLLECTIVE IMPACT
Collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems level change. (*From the Collective Impact Forum*)
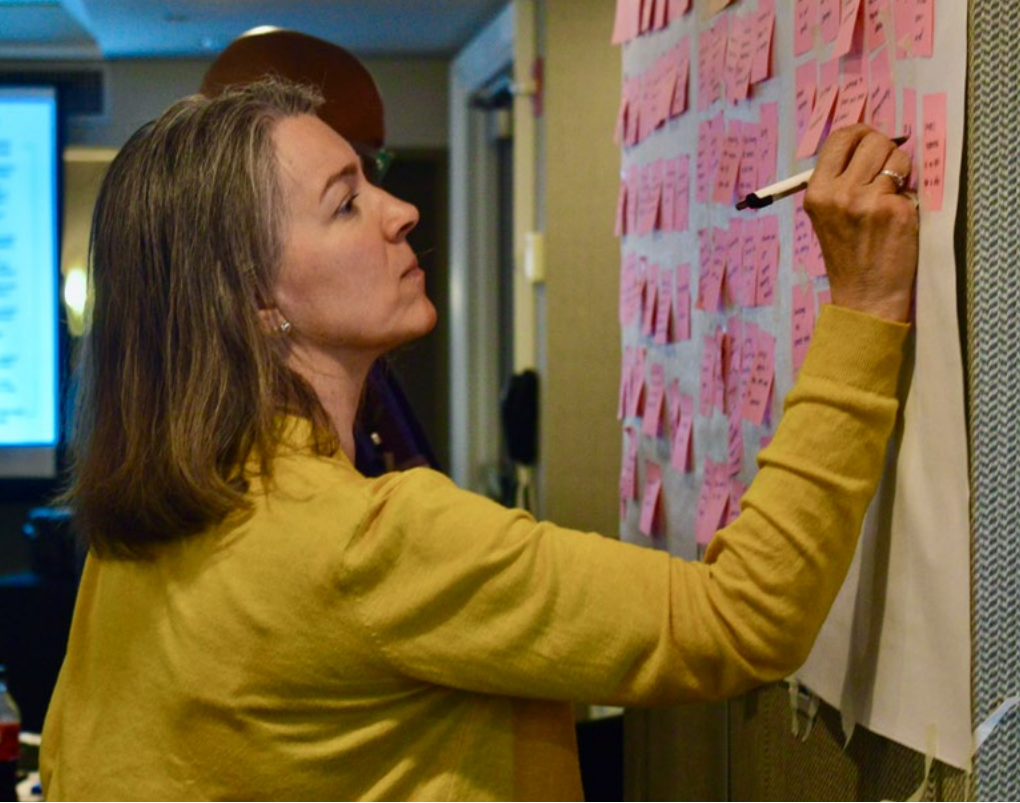
The Lab hosted listening sessions with key stakeholders including K-12 leaders, higher ed leaders, learners and their families, workforce development leaders, employers, nonprofit leaders, and policymakers to gather their feedback on the dual enrollment program design from their experiences. A few standout themes that emerged include:

- Partnerships are about shared power, shared information, shared resources, and shared understanding among all stakeholders.

- Pathways currently aren't designed to be seamless, which will require more alignment and willingness to transform.

- Employers should be engaged as essential partners, since they can provide both work-based learning opportunities and the jobs at the end of the pathways.

- Focus efforts on the specific needs and challenges faced by learners who don't traditionally have access to these pathways.

Photo Credit: Stephanie Ogilvie Seagle, Communications Director, Education Design Lab

Design Insight #3

Supporting the designers as whole people allows them to bring their best selves to their roles and align their personal values to their professional responsibilities.

Another crucial insight that has emerged during the planning and kick-off process is the need to be mindful of the designers as whole people. Recognizing that designers are not just professionals, but individuals with personal lives and emotions is essential for creating a positive and productive work environment. Designers will invest significant time, energy, and creativity into their project, and prioritizing their wholeness will ultimately lead to better design outcomes. As part of the formative evaluation, the Lab team is constantly checking in with the designers to assess the impact of the activities and support, and adjusting the design based on their feedback to better meet their current needs. Space is carved out during the design sessions to discuss personal and institutional challenges and provide peer support and encouragement.

True systemic change can only be achieved by considering the needs, perspectives, and experiences of all people impacted by the system. The Lab is utilizing a **cohort learning model** for DIR 2.0 that involves recognizing and

valuing the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that individuals bring to the learning community. Instead of solely focusing on academic or professional aspects, a cohort learning model acknowledges that participants have multifaceted identities, interests, and personal experiences that shape their learning journey.

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 **growth, agency, and belonging** that are at the very heart of our Learner Engagement Framework. Every learner deserves to have these fundamental psychological needs met, and experiencing this fulfillment can foster well-being and deep, sustained engagement in learning.

Process Planning

Before launching DIR 2.0, it was important to plan how it would be executed. Though the process was time intensive, taking a step back to look at the bigger picture enabled the Lab to intentionally weave the design insights into the program design and foster a program that will deliver results.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
Engage learners, families, and regional stakeholders. To equitably meet community and stakeholder needs and goals, the Lab started by engaging them in the planning process. Such involvement also helped to build broad support for program plans. Centering learners and families begins right from the start of the process.

RESEARCH BEST PRACTICES
No matter what the problem is, it is likely that a solution was attempted before. Researching best practices helped the Lab learn from the experiences of others to discover what works and what doesn't, as well as how to replicate successes and avoid mistakes. The Lab also explored cohort learning models, equity-centered design, regional ecosystem partnerships and collective impact, and dual enrollment guided pathways.

COLLECT + SHARE LOCAL DATA
Understanding the scope and root of the problem involves collecting quantitative and qualitative data specific to and from the target community. The results were shared with the designers to engage them in understanding the data. This process will be repeated with data from each designer's specific region. When implemented well, this phase grounds the project in the lived experience of the populations most proximate to the problem.

PLAN
The Lab engaged all stakeholders to provide input and/or participate in the planning phase, when core values and goals were first established. From there, a theory of change was created to summarize strategies, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts, and used to create the curriculum, evaluation plan, budget, and staffing model to prepare for implementation in the next step. It is in the Plan phase where deliberate intentional design is used to incorporate all of the design insights into the project plan, and a continuous improvement plan is set up to ensure accountability. An action planning approach is used to provide further design details to all program activities.

DO-CHECK-ADJUST CYCLE
Implementation begins after the Plan phase. According to the evaluation plan, data will be gathered and analyzed to compare to expected outputs, quality, outcomes, quality, program experience, and process so that decisions can be made for program improvement. At this point, adjustments are made to the Plan and the next Do-Check-Adjust iterative cycle begins.

"Our team in Louisiana is continually pushing ourselves to cultivate innovative new opportunities to connect students to the educational pathways and holistic supports that will enable them to fulfill their educational purpose while also supporting community needs.

I am delighted to be joining the team at Education Design Lab, the first Designers in Residence cohort, and our new group of designers to expand thinking nationally and find new ways to recenter learners at the heart of the student success conversation."

— Dr. Tamika Duplessis, Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Delgado Community College

Next Steps

Follow updates on the Designers in Residence 2.0: Accelerating Pathways project page.

As this project progresses, anticipated learnings will come from the four strategies:

Cohort Learning Model - Designers in Residence will progress through a program together to develop their skills and knowledge to implement equitable dual enrollment programs and learn from each other as they work on their unique pathways.

Regional Ecosystems - The designers will bring together regional design teams to develop a blueprint for collective action.

Equity-Centered Design - The designers will understand the lived experiences of the students and families accessing and not accessing dual enrollment programs, invite them to participate in the regional design teams, and allow their voices to share in the conversation and design pathways that lead to more inclusive results.

Dual Enrollment Pathways - Each institution will develop at least one dual enrollment pathway that is accessible, affordable, and accelerated leading to an associate's degree one year after high school graduation.

Learnings on each of these strategies will be highlighted in blog posts, on the webpage, and in future insights briefs.

The Lab will visit each college in fall 2023 to co-facilitate their first regional design team meetings. By spring 2024, each college will have a blueprint that maps out their regional design team's commitment to the pathway they plan to launch in fall 2024. The evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the program design as well as the overall impact of the project.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all of the learners, families, higher education leaders, K-12 leaders, employers, workforce development leaders, and policymakers who shared their perspectives as we start on this important work.

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- **East Los Angeles College**
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- **Chaffey College**
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- **Lone Star College** – **Tomball**
  Dr. Jackie Thomas, Jr., Designer
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