CHEPP The Center for Higher Education
Policy and Practice

INCREASING SUCCESS THROUGH LEARNER-CENTERED DESIGN

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Who Are Today's Learners?

Today's learners frequently enter postsecondary education later in life, come from wide-ranging backgrounds and have a diverse set of responsibilities. Whether traditional age (18-22 years) or older (25+), they also come from much less affluent families than they did at the time the Higher Education Act first passed in 1965.

Fast Facts

Among today's learners, research estimates (CHEPP, 2023):

- 64% work while going to school
- 49% are financially independent from their parents
- 40% attend college part-time
- 37% are over age 25

- 34% are the first in their family to attend college
- 24% are parents
- 19% have a psychological or physical disability
- 3 in 5 experienced recent food or housing insecurity

A Mismatch Between Today's Higher Education System and the Learners it Serves

Although the students who attend postsecondary institutions have changed, the design of higher education programing has remained very similar. The expectation that students are able to put life on hold for four years to attend college full-time during the day still works for many 18-year-old recent high school graduates. But for those with inadequate financial support, competing work and family obligations, and limited family experience with higher education, the traditional higher education model routinely leaves learners behind, including returning adult learners. As of the 2023-24 academic year, more than 43 million Americans had some college credit without a credential (Cohen, J., et al., 2025). The systemic barriers for today's learners include:

- **High costs** facing today's learners, including tuition and living expenses, put significant financial strain on learners and their families (Georgetown University, 2024) and leave many college graduates with crushing student debt (TICAS, 2021).
- **In-person classes offered during work hours** do not work for students who are increasingly working full-time and caring for children or other family members.
- **A broken college credit transfer system** that doesn't recognize credits from other institutions, or award learning for career skills slows credit accumulation and delays graduation for learners transferring between institutions or returning to college after stopping out (CHEPP, 2024).
- **A lack of personalized supports** leaves students balancing work and family obligations, first-generation learners, and students who are financially struggling without the necessary resources, including academic advising, childcare, transportation, housing and emergency aid, needed to stay enrolled and graduate.
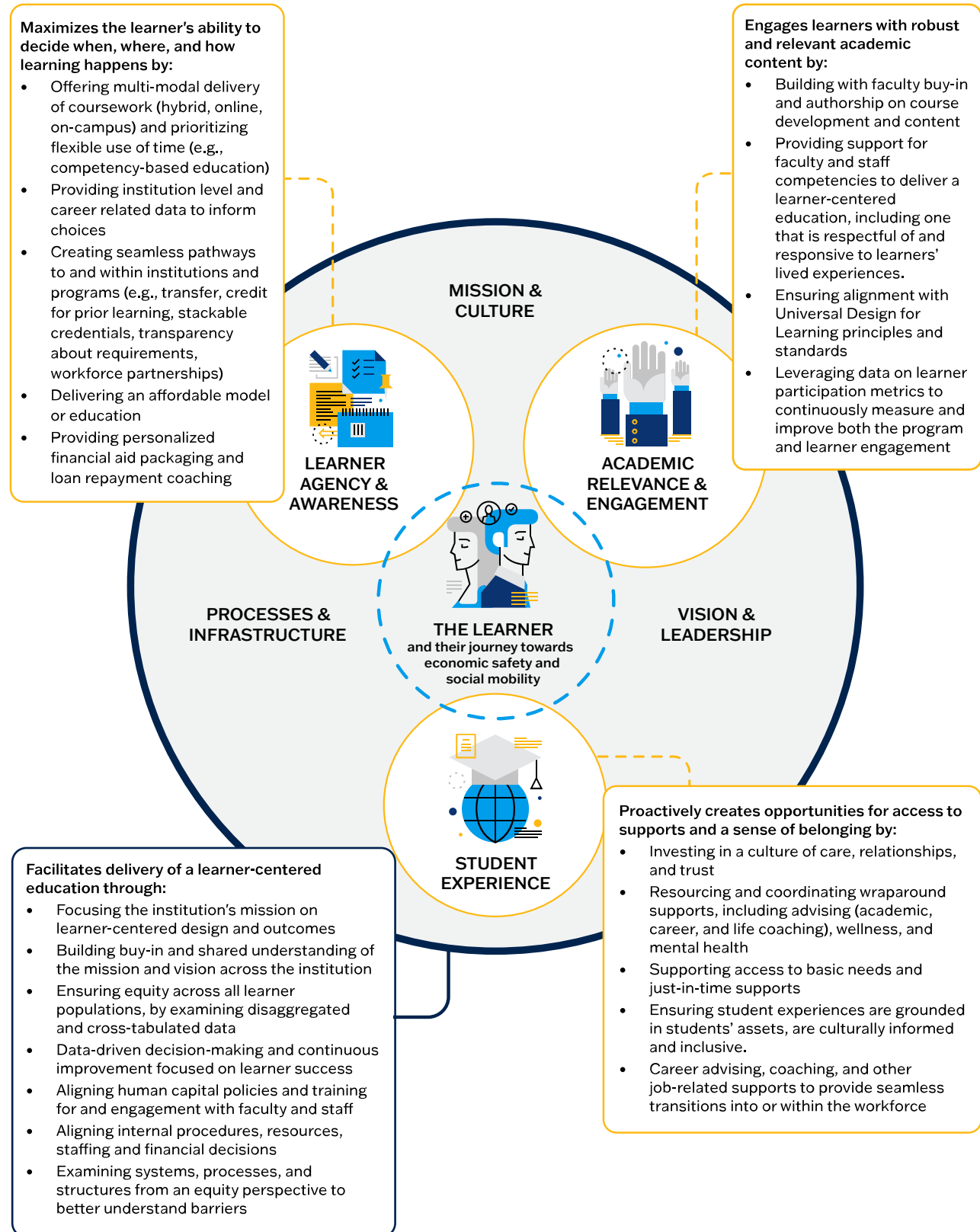
Using Learner-Centered Design to Meet the Needs of Today's Learners

Higher education institutions should work to design postsecondary programs that aim to address the following areas:

- **Focus on affordability** by exploring alternative program designs that deliver quality education for less money, including online and hybrid options, utilizing employer-funded partnerships, and leveraging credit for prior learning.
- **Deliver flexible program options** through hybrid, online and competency-based education models that enable learners to learn at their own pace and build skills they know will be useful in the labor market.
- **Create streamlined and nimble educational pathways** through transparent course progressions to on-time graduation, clear credit transfer policies, and making available prior learning assessments (PLAs) that allow students to earn credit for what they already know.
- **Provide strong student supports** such as academic advising and career coaching, as well as childcare, transportation, meals, and emergency aid.

CHEPP developed a learner-centered design framework to assist policymakers and practitioners in their efforts to center learners in higher education. The framework is on the following page.

A Learner-Centered Design Framework

Maximizes the learner's ability to decide when, where, and how learning happens by:
- Offering multi-modal delivery of coursework (hybrid, online, on-campus) and prioritizing flexible use of time (e.g., competency-based education)
- Providing institution level and career related data to inform choices
- Creating seamless pathways to and within institutions and programs (e.g., transfer, credit for prior learning, stackable credentials, transparency about requirements, workforce partnerships)
- Delivering an affordable model or education
- Providing personalized financial aid packaging and loan repayment coaching

Engages learners with robust and relevant academic content by:
- Building with faculty buy-in and authorship on course development and content
- Providing support for faculty and staff competencies to deliver a learner-centered education, including one that is respectful of and responsive to learners' lived experiences.
- Ensuring alignment with Universal Design for Learning principles and standards
- Leveraging data on learner participation metrics to continuously measure and improve both the program and learner engagement

MISSION & CULTURE

LEARNER AGENCY & AWARENESS

ACADEMIC RELEVANCE & ENGAGEMENT

PROCESSES & INFRASTRUCTURE

THE LEARNER
and their journey towards economic safety and social mobility

VISION & LEADERSHIP

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Facilitates delivery of a learner-centered education through:
- Focusing the institution's mission on learner-centered design and outcomes
- Building buy-in and shared understanding of the mission and vision across the institution
- Ensuring equity across all learner populations, by examining disaggregated and cross-tabulated data
- Data-driven decision-making and continuous improvement focused on learner success
- Aligning human capital policies and training for and engagement with faculty and staff
- Aligning internal procedures, resources, staffing and financial decisions
- Examining systems, processes, and structures from an equity perspective to better understand barriers

Proactively creates opportunities for access to supports and a sense of belonging by:
- Investing in a culture of care, relationships, and trust
- Resourcing and coordinating wraparound supports, including advising (academic, career, and life coaching), wellness, and mental health
- Supporting access to basic needs and just-in-time supports
- Ensuring student experiences are grounded in students' assets, are culturally informed and inclusive.
- Career advising, coaching, and other job-related supports to provide seamless transitions into or within the workforce

Source: Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice (CHEPP). (2024). Online by Design: How Learner-Centered Higher Education Design and Delivery Accelerates Equitable Access and Outcomes. https://www.chepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CHEPP_ONLINE-BY-DESIGN_WHITE-PAPER85.pdf

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