



Reimagining the Higher Education Ecosystem: Design Brief

Prompt

How might we empower people to design their own learning journeys so they can lead purposeful and economically stable lives?

The Problem

Technology is rapidly transforming the way we live, learn, and work. Entirely new jobs are emerging as others are lost to automation. People are living longer, yet switching jobs more often. These dramatic shifts call for a reimagining of the way we prepare for work and life—specifically, how we learn new skills and adapt to a changing economic landscape.

The changes ahead are likely to hurt most those who can least afford to manage them: low-income and first generation learners already ill-served by our existing postsecondary education system. Our current system stifles economic mobility and widens income and achievement gaps; we must act now to ensure that we have an educational ecosystem flexible and fair enough to help all people live purposeful and economically stable lives. And if we are to design solutions proportionate to this problem, new technologies must be called on to scale approaches that reach the millions of vulnerable people across the country.

The Challenge

The Challenge—Reimagining the Higher Education Ecosystem—seeks bold ideas for how our postsecondary education system could be reimagined to foster equity and encourage learner agency and resilience. We seek specific pilots to move us toward a future in which all learners can achieve economic stability and lead purposeful lives.

This Challenge invites participants to articulate a vision and then design pilot projects for a future ecosystem that has the following characteristics:

- **Expands access:** The educational system must ensure that all people—including low-income learners who are disproportionately underserved by the current higher education system—can leverage education to live meaningful and economically stable lives.
- **Draws on a broad postsecondary ecosystem:** While college and universities play a vital role in educating students, there is a much larger ecosystem in which students learn. This ecosystem includes non-traditional “classes” or alternative learning providers, such as MOOCs, bootcamps, and online courses as well as on-the-job training and informal learning. Our future learning system must value the learning that happens in many different environments and enable seamless transitions between learning, work, and life.

Opportunity Areas

We have identified three important categories ripe for innovative solutions. We encourage submissions aligned to one or more of these opportunity areas.

1. **Curating lifelong learning pathways:** People are working longer and in jobs that require them to keep learning new skills. As a result, instead of completing most of their education before they start their careers, they are learning continuously over the course of their lifetimes. How might we ensure that people have access to learning opportunities that match their evolving personal and professional goals? In particular, can you imagine new types of education-to-work pathways and credentials that support low-income people and other disadvantaged populations in achieving living-wage work?
2. **Creating a marketplace for student learning:** Increasingly, people are collecting learning experiences and the credentials that communicate their accomplishments from multiple education providers. How might we create educational marketplaces that help learners discover and curate learning resources aligned with their goals? Taking this one step further, what ideas do you have to help learners effectively signal the knowledge and skills they collect from multiple sources? And how will we ensure that all different kinds of employers from various sectors will actually recognize and understand the meaning of these credentials?
3. **Leveraging emerging technology:** Technologies such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, and virtual and mixed reality allow us to solve problems that we could not solve before. How might we leverage these emerging technologies to improve individual learning experiences? More broadly, how might open standards on credentials, competencies, and assessments be used to bridge the education and workforce ecosystems? As increasing amounts of data about individuals are generated through this technology-rich learning environment, how might we allow people to own and securely manage their own digital identities, electing when and how that information is shared?

Guidance

During this Challenge, we're excited to see ideas that:

- Incorporate specific, actionable pilots (or “scalable betas”) that can be launched in the near term.
- Demonstrate relevance for traditionally underserved populations (such as people with low incomes, new immigrants, first-generation learners, and transitioning service members, etc.).
- Address one or more of the three opportunity areas identified.
- Facilitate seamless transitions between learning and work.
- Include “big bet” ideas that enable transformative change.

Logistics & Prizes

- The Challenge runs June 13 - August 8. Winners will be announced in September.
- Prizes include national recognition, an invitation to a national convening sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, mentorship packages, and priority consideration for edtech accelerators and/or pitch competitions.
- After a period of refinement, top ideas will be put before philanthropic and venture funders for consideration.

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