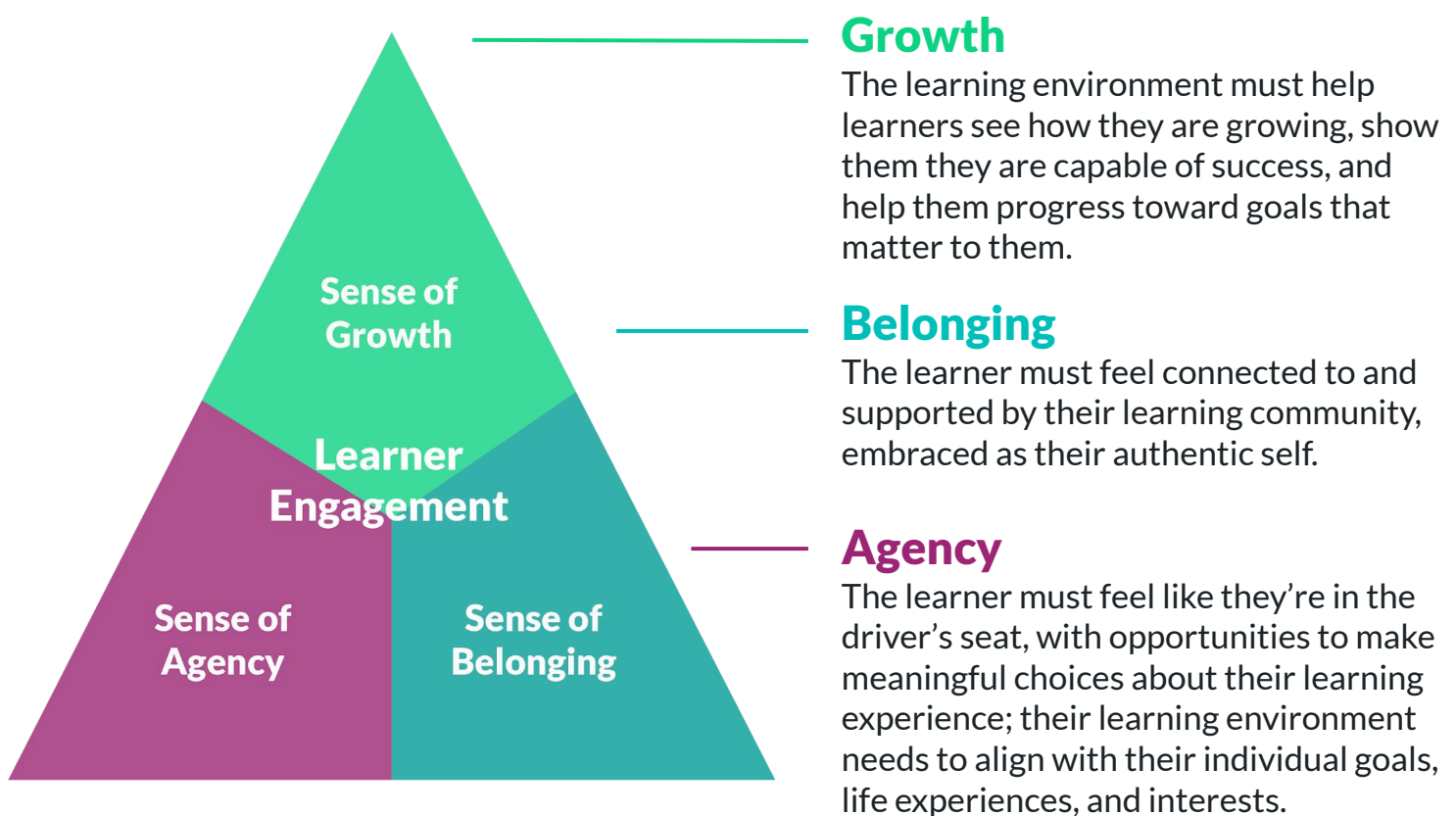


Supporting Learners' High-Quality Engagement

The engagement framework we use at the Education Design Lab is based on core principles of [Self-Determination Theory \(SDT\)](#), a metatheory of human behavior and motivation developed by psychologists and behavioral scientists over the past several decades. Research conducted with diverse populations across the world has shown that we *all* need to have three drivers of engagement (or basic psychological needs) fulfilled in order for us to thrive: growth, belonging, and agency. Designing learning environments to intentionally support these drivers for specific learners (e.g. adults returning to college, single mother learners, etc.) can in turn promote their individual retention in school, depth of learning, program completion, goal attainment, and well-being.



This framework can serve as a lens through which to **understand the experiences of learners** and glean **actionable insights** about how to design with and for them to close equity and opportunity gaps, as well as improve engagement, retention, performance, and satisfaction.

To design learning environments that support growth, agency, and belonging, **we must first work to understand the experiences, identities, hopes/goals, and interests of learners in our communities today**, especially those who have been underinvested in and underserved.

Drivers of Engagement: Growth

To experience a sense of growth, learners need to feel like they are capable of success in school and beyond and like they're making progress toward goals that they personally care about.

Many different situations may lead to a learner's sense of growth being frustrated – for example, if they face basic needs insecurities that prevent them from being present at school, if they don't feel like they are making headway toward the future they want for themselves, or if particular material feels impossible to master.

Learning environments must help learners see how they are growing, show them they are capable of success, and help them progress toward goals that matter to them.

"I definitely worry about if my degree will help my career. **Like what if I've put in all this time and money and my business doesn't take off?**"

"I don't know what **my bigger picture goals for school and my career are.** I'm stuck at trying to figure that out."

"**Last week I needed a little assistance.** I was able to come get some eggs and different food products [from **the school food pantry**], and it helped keep my family alive."

Learners may feel a strong sense of growth if they have identified clear, personally meaningful goals they want to work toward, can see how their activities at school are helping them make progress toward these goals, and feel like they have the support and resources they need in order to succeed in their careers

A few recommendations for supporting returning adult students' sense of **growth**:

- Streamline **support for basic needs insecurities** (e.g. WSCC's child care program)
- Provide **clear paths toward individual goals** with incremental milestones to mark learning and progress, especially focusing on job readiness (e.g. micro-pathways)
- Provide opportunities to directly **combine work + learning** (e.g. Zane State College's earn + learn programs)
- Shift toward **competency-based learning** (e.g. PGCC's CBE model) to facilitate **growth mindset** cultivation, focusing on continual growth rather than performance

Drivers of Engagement: Belonging

Learners need to feel a sense of belonging in their work environments in order to experience high-quality engagement. They need to feel at home in their learning communities, embraced for their full identities, and deeply supported in their relationships with faculty, other learners, and staff.

Learners must feel connected to and supported by their learning communities, embraced as their authentic selves.

"I was a high school dropout. **I didn't think that I'd even go to college** because it just wasn't who I was. **I felt like I'm not smart enough.**"

The area is **very "cliquey"** in the sense that if you weren't born and raised within the community, or don't look like it, you won't exactly be 100% **accepted** or seen as **"one of the pals."**

I'm transgender, gay, and neurodivergent. This affects the way I experience being a part of my broader community in that **I do not feel like I am a part of it.**

Everyone here makes me feel very **welcome.**

People may not feel a sense of belonging in their learning communities if they don't have opportunities to form safe, close relationships, don't feel like their identity fits in or is represented and celebrated at their institution, or don't feel accepted for who they are as whole people.

A few recommendations for supporting returning adult learners' sense of **belonging**:

- Focus on supporting **diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility** across all parts of institutions (e.g. FLCC's DEI Plan)
- Intentionally support **relationship building** with other adult learners and faculty and staff who treat them as peers (e.g. Delgado's SMART program – connection opportunities explicitly created for single mother learners)
- Offer learners opportunities to both **receive support from + contribute to their communities**. Demonstrate that they matter to the whole community.
- Focus on **supporting growth + agency** in relationships. (e.g. CNM's holistic coaching model)

Drivers of Engagement: Agency

Learners need to feel a sense of agency to feel supported and guided in authoring their own learning and career journeys. To foster deep, sustained engagement, institutions should align programs to learners' hopes for the future, interests, priorities, and life experiences and provide them with meaningful choices about their educational journeys.

Learners must feel like they're in the driver's seat, with opportunities to make meaningful choices about their learning experiences; their learning environments need to align with their individual life experiences, interests, and hopes for the future.

"I feel confident. I do, because now that I've made a career change in my education with going from nursing to business, it all makes sense. I'm still helping people, so **I'm living within my purpose**. I feel really good because **I can see my future now as I couldn't see it before.**"

"**I can't work right now because my school schedule won't allow me to.** So it's hard because **if I put my daughter in daycare, I won't be able to go to school because I can't pay for it**, so I'll have to go to work. But **the whole point of me putting her in daycare was so I can go to school.**"

Learners may not feel a sense of agency if their institution does not support learning integrating seamlessly in with work, family, and other important parts of their lives or if they feel forced into programs or timelines that don't align with their priorities.

A few recommendations for supporting returning adult learners' sense of **agency**:

- Support **personalized career exploration + design** – help learners envision their futures + articulate goals they care about (e.g. EMCC's Destination You)
- Offer **flexible learning opportunities** in terms of time, place, and pace of learning (e.g. FLCC's GRIT model)
- **Recognize + award credit for work + life experience** (e.g. XCredit)
- Support development of **technical skills + 21st century skills** and award **industry-recognized credentials** to tighten connection between work and learning and support job attainment (e.g. Ivy Tech's One-Learner Ecosystem and PimaFastTrack)