

Learner Voice: A Guide

As the “nontraditional” learner becomes the new traditional learner, the postsecondary education field is seeing rapidly evolving learner profiles and needs. Despite talk of the potential of individualized learning and methodologies like learner-centered design, the postsecondary education sector lags behind many others in the incorporation of the needs, motivations, and perspectives of the individuals it seeks to serve.

The Charles Koch Foundation believes that the purpose of education is to unlock learners’ potential by helping them discover their aptitudes and interests, develop skills, and then deploy knowledge to benefit themselves and others. We seek to provide the education sector with key tips on how to harness the power of Learner Voice and put it into practice to make this vision become a reality.

How to Use this Guide

This guide is a starting point for postsecondary education program leaders to explore Learner Voice and key practices to begin to incorporate Learner Voice into their program design. While the guide is primarily for postsecondary education program leaders and funders, it can also be a useful tool and reference guide for nonprofit leaders, innovators, and learners who want to explore or deepen their commitment to serving the needs of individual learners.

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What is Learner Voice?

Learner Voice is the expression of an individual learner’s real and perceived needs, their motivations, and their past experiences. At its core, supporting Learner Voice requires prioritizing and valuing the input of learners as equal to or potentially more important than the input or voices of other stakeholders. In practice, students’ views are gathered through a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. By focusing on Learner Voice, education program leaders can deliver more transformative outcomes for learners, enhance the value of time and resources invested in programs, and support a more equitable and inclusive system for all.

How Does Learner Voice Show Up in Education Program Design Today?

Unfortunately, many education program leaders today assume that learners don’t know what they want. But the truth is that education program leaders may not be viewing their strategies from the perspective of the learner. As Michael Horn, coauthor of *Choosing College*, explains, “The metrics and data on which an institution might optimize are fundamentally supply-side in nature. They view the world from the perspective of those institutions that deliver education.

But the problem with that is that using data in that case might not match the demand side of the equation — Learner Voice.”¹

Education program leaders have a responsibility to confront assumptions and the ways in which existing processes and programs have failed learners. High dropout rates, burdensome student debt, and lagging employment outcomes are all signs that there is room to create solutions that better meet individuals’ needs. Being an education program leader focused on Learner Voice requires a mindset shift to remember that, while learners might not be able to articulate a clear solution to their needs, they can absolutely share what is and isn’t working from their personal experience and can help education program leaders to think anew and build a better future.

Why Engage Learner Voice in Program Design?

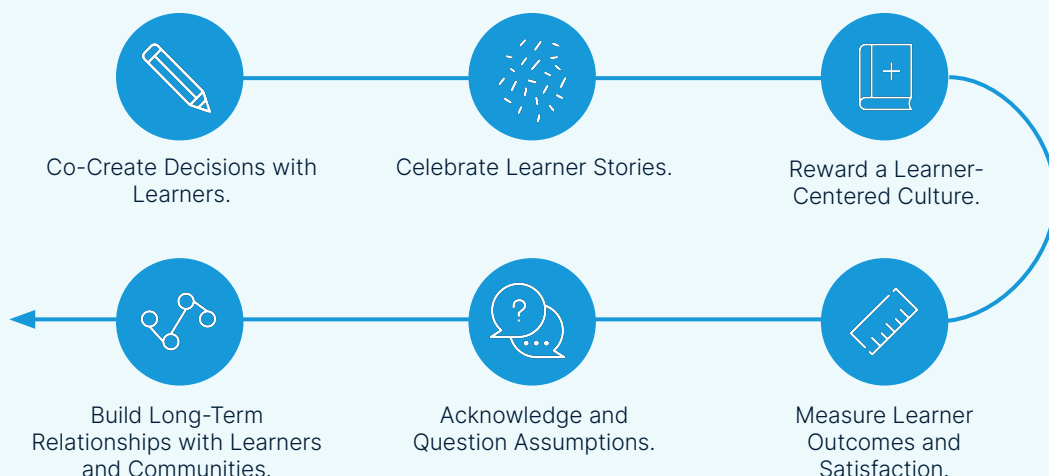
61%

of Americans said universities should do a better job of changing to meet the needs of students. In comparison, only 16% thought students needed to do a better job of adjusting to the model of a traditional college.²

6 Practices For Incorporating Learner Voice



A demonstrated commitment to Learner Voice



¹ Horn, Michael. “Opening Keynote: Why is Learner Voice Valuable?” Co-Creating Education, Charles Koch Foundation and Common Group, 14 Oct. 2021. Keynote Speech.

² “CKF Poll: Majority of Americans Think Colleges Should Innovate, Adapt to Students’ Needs.” Charles Koch Foundation, 1 Sept. 2021.



Six Practices for Incorporating Learner Voice

Co-Create Decisions with Learners.

1

The postsecondary education field can learn from best practices in fields outside of education. User interviews are table stakes for for-profit companies and funders in assessing potential new products or investments. Education program leaders in particular have a lot to gain from involving postsecondary learners early in the program design and grantmaking processes to ensure that programs and pathways are relevant to the learner population.

Steps You Can Take

- ▶ **For Education Program Leaders:** Talk to your learners early and often. Oftentimes, learners don't know how valuable their voices are or even that they can be involved in decisions. Engaging students as paid advisors or part-time employees can be a great first step to incorporating learners' insights into decision making.
- ▶ **For Funders:** Set up a panel made up of your target population of learners in order to help your team better assess potential grants and investments. Ask for their perspectives on which programs they would use and what programs need to include in order to meet their needs.

Celebrate Learner Stories.

2

The concept of Learner Voice tends to feel very abstract. Grounding the concept in actual learner stories — in which learners are able to talk freely about their own experiences, needs, and emotions — will help showcase the value of Learner Voice within your organization and with external stakeholders. Telling learner stories will also empower other learners to step up, share their own stories, and advocate for their own needs and experiences.

Steps You Can Take

- ▶ **For Education Program Leaders:** Publicly share stories, narratives, and case studies that showcase the value of Learner Voice. Feature learner stories in public-facing materials, such as impact reports and presentations.
- ▶ **For Funders:** Share your grantees' or investees' learner stories with other funders to encourage them to see the value of Learner Voice.



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Being an international student from a low-income family, my responsibilities went beyond simply having to complete my schoolwork. Not only did I have to put in the time and effort to succeed academically, but I also had to juggle having a job, to cover my school and personal expenses, and keeping up with the paperwork and appointments required to stay in the country. There's a lot more to being a student than showing up to class and turning in your assignments.

— Andrea, Common Space User Panelist

Andrea's story highlights an important theme we've heard from learners about what prevents them from completing their programs — time poverty. In fact, 87% of learners don't finish 2-year degree programs, and a major reason is that there is no free time to fit education into busy schedules.⁴

How might we design a program for learners who have multiple responsibilities and jobs?

³ Populace Insights: American Priorities For Higher Education. Populace.org.

⁴ "Statistic of the Month: Comparing Community College Completion Rates." NCEE, 9 May 2013.

Why Engage Learner Voice in Program Design?

21%

of postsecondary students have given feedback to their institutions — with many saying they did not expect institution officials to respond.⁵

Reward a Learner-Centered Culture.

3

In our research, we discovered that many barriers to incorporating Learner Voice into strategies revolved around culture. These included entrenched legacy processes, lack of institutional incentives to listen to learners, and lack of an organizational culture that honors learners' unique backgrounds, histories, cultures, and perspectives. Education program leaders should play a vital role in empowering all learners to discover, develop, and deploy their unique aptitudes and gifts. As a leader, you can start by creating a culture that rewards listening to learners' perspectives and engaging them in co-creating decisions.

Steps You Can Take

- ▶ **For Education Program Leaders:** Reward employees who take the initiative to speak directly with learners and share insights with the team. Celebrate them by highlighting these employees at all-hands meetings, promoting them, and investing in their professional development.
- ▶ **For Funders:** Build a learner-centric culture by incorporating Learner Voice ideas into your mission and operations. Reward grantmaking processes that build in listening to Learner Voice, and share success stories from your grantees and investees who have engaged with Learner Voice.

Measure Learner Outcomes and Satisfaction.

4

Although net promoter score (NPS) has been a longstanding standard for understanding customer satisfaction, there are limitations to relying solely on NPS and other traditional success metrics, particularly in education. Some organizations have adopted a net transformational score and other metrics around retention, engagement, and long-term career outcomes to provide a more nuanced picture of learner outcomes. It's important to first align on the long-term outcomes and set a strategy around outcome measurement, understanding that metrics typically used in external communications and marketing materials may not be relevant for learners.

Steps You Can Take

- ▶ **For Education Program Leaders:** Align on measuring the quality and impact of programs for alumni. Start by identifying 1-2 measures that are relevant and meaningful to learner outcomes and set up systems to gather input to understand these measures.
- ▶ **For Funders:** Advise and mentor grantees and investees to design metrics that focus more on outputs than inputs. Hold them accountable to measuring and tracking the more complex but meaningful outcomes, like long-term employment outcomes, satisfaction outcomes, and return on investment.



“

Even as things started to reopen [after COVID-related shutdowns], there wasn't a lot of conversation about "here's how we can support you." The school wasn't very proactive. I didn't provide feedback to my institution because it didn't really seem like an option. It never occurred to me to say, "You taught me what you said you were going to, but it turns out that that's not all I needed."

— Jessica, SkillUp Coalition Career Builder

Jessica had valuable feedback to provide to her institution but didn't feel like she had the space to submit that feedback. Now more than ever — with recent enrollment declines of more than 6% in the last two years and rising dropout rates of up to 40% — education program leaders can do better at listening to their learners' voices to learn what programs and supports would be relevant to them.^{6, 7}

How might we create spaces where learners feel safe and encouraged to provide continuous input for program innovation?

⁵ "Do College Students Feel Heard by Professors and Administrators on Their Campuses?" *Inside Higher Ed*, Accessed 5 Nov. 2021.

⁶ "Current Term Enrollment Estimates." National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 30 June 2020.

⁷ Hanson, Melanie. "College Dropout Rates." *EducationData.org*, September 14, 2021.

Acknowledge and Question Assumptions.

Education programs are built on assumptions about the learner. But the truth is, the profile of the postsecondary learner is rapidly evolving and will continue to change due to social, economic, and political factors.

It is the responsibility of education program leaders to understand learner stories, help them connect to their skills and passions, and use these connections to contribute to society.

Steps You Can Take

- ▶ **For Education Program Leaders:** Go beyond data collection and analysis, and truly embody a continuous improvement mindset by diving deep into your organization's demographic and engagement data. Conduct interviews and surveys frequently to take a "pulse check" of the learners in your programs.
- ▶ **For Funders:** Stay up to date with the latest research and trends in the postsecondary industry. Engage staff and interns who are more proximate to the learners and become curious about who is engaging with the programs you are investing in.

Build Long-Term Relationships with Learners and Communities.

While one-off learner interviews and learner panels can be useful for specific use cases, the real value lies in developing and maintaining long-term relationships and creating continuous feedback loops. Building trust and mutually beneficial relationships is crucial to engaging learners fully and providing a space where they can share feedback frequently and freely.

Steps You Can Take

- ▶ **For Education Program Leaders:** Train student-facing staff, such as counselors and coaches, to build empathy and create long-term relationships with their learners. Give the learners a reason to keep coming back to give feedback — whether it's compensation, a learning community, networking, or job opportunities.
- ▶ **For Funders:** Set up long-term learner advisory panels. Treat learners as you would any trusted advisors: value their time and their expertise. Develop a sense of community within the learner panel and integrate them into your larger organization by inviting them to all-hands meetings and conferences.

Putting Learner Voice into Practice

Supporting Learner Voice is not possible without commitment to and action toward understanding and valuing the perspectives of individual learners. Like any new approach, it requires ongoing work and examination to do well.

If you are interested in deepening your work on Learner Voice, please connect using the links below.

Special Thanks

Championing Learner Voice is a collaborative effort. Our work on Learner Voice would not have been possible without our partners at the following organizations:

- American Council on Education
- Arizona State University
- Charles Koch Foundation
- Common Group
- Education Design Lab
- EQOS
- SkillUp Coalition
- Strada Education Network
- UNCF
- WGU Labs

Have an inquiry or an interesting idea around Learner Voice? Reach out!



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