Learner Experience Design: Intentionally Building for Working Adults

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This is the third white paper in a series in which we outline key supports that are critical for working adult learners’ success.

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Why Learner Experience Design Matters

Alyssa, a 34-year old cashier at a large retailer, is taking a big step this fall, one that she never thought she would make. She’s going to college.

Alyssa represents the significant population of working adult learners — postsecondary students over the age of 24 who work 20 or more hours per week. As adult learners comprise ~40% of America’s post-secondary student population, it is important to ensure that their unique needs are met. Providing them with a great learner experience that fits alongside their employment is critical, especially in a time of economic turbulence.

Intentionally designing learner experiences is a relatively new concept in higher education. Typically, the learner journey and experience are byproducts of content and knowledge progression. As more non-traditional students have entered higher ed — like full-time workers, students over the age of 24, and first-generation students — Learner Experience (LX) has become an increasingly important concept to support their journey. The impact of COVID-19 has brought this need into stark relief: as learners have been pushed into online-learning contexts, poorly designed LXs have exacerbated existing inequalities.

Although effective LX design benefits all students, it is particularly essential to the needs of first-time and first-generation working adult learners. A study by Barnes & Noble Education comparing 1,000 traditional and 800 non-traditional students found marked differences.

Feelings of disconnection from school or a student community can compound existing anxieties for

1 NCES, Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex, and age: Selected years, 1970 through 2028, March 2019
2 Non-traditional in this context meaning any of: full-time worker, first-generation in college, age 25+, has dependents, is a veteran, etc.
working adult learners and make a bumpy road full of new technological tools and expectations even harder to navigate.

Given that many institutions struggle with siloed departments, it can be difficult to deliver on all of the key dimensions of LX. Faculty are often not aware of the conversations between students and advisors, and advisors are often not aware of the information faculty provide students at the start of their classes. In designing a comprehensive LX, institutions recognize that each student interaction — whether an advisory meeting, an orientation session, a friendly chat with a professor, or a letter from the provost — is an opportunity to convey cohesive messaging, a sense of belonging, and encouragement to persist to the end. An intentionally-designed LX helps students overcome challenges and move through critical inflection points with greater agility and confidence.

Used across a variety of fields, a focus on User Experience (UX) ensures an intentional, navigable, smooth user journey. Savvy institutions are using this moment to develop or incorporate best practices of User Experience into Learner Experience Design (LXD). By deploying similar strategies, tailored for the specialized needs of education, institutions can reduce learner friction, support learning, and improve outcomes.

**TERMS:**

**UX:** User Experience, or the attitudes and feelings a person has toward a particular process or product

**LX:** Learner Experience, or a learner’s perception and responses to the combined elements that comprise the learner journey, including logistics, instruction, communications, resources, and supports

**LXD:** Learner Experience Design, or the holistic approach of designing a Learner Experience to result in success for learners

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3 Lumina Foundation, *From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential*, October 2012. Once attending classes, many working adult learners experience classroom-related anxieties related to participating in classes with their younger classmates, guilt over missing out on family life, and fear of failure.
Redesigning the Learner Experience with Working Adults in Mind

At Guild’s Learning Solutions, we believe that when institutions invest in designing the Learner Experience for working adult learners in a way that is rooted in strong supports that foster belonging, improvements in retention and completion will follow.

A powerful Learner Experience (LX) addresses the totality of a learner’s interaction with an institution, from the moment a learner is accepted through graduation. That may seem like a tall order, but when institutions engage in deep analysis and LX-focused design work, previously unseen details, patterns, and assumptions come to light. Institutions may unknowingly present barriers to student success. For example, institutions may not effectively teach students how to navigate what researchers call the “hidden curriculum” — those crucial skills that enable success in today’s institutions of higher education. Institutions are responsible for ensuring that working adult learners understand when to visit the registrar versus the bursar (or what the difference is), how advisors can support them beyond scheduling classes, and how to navigate basic tech tools. A thorough review of the student journey and the surrounding experience is an opportunity to address barriers and capitalize on student strengths.

The Power of Asset-Based Approaches:

Working adult learners juggle competing priorities like work and family, and they may not feel as confident as other students, especially if they are returning to school after a long hiatus. But it is important not to talk about these learners in terms of deficits, says Dr. L.T. Miles, UCLA Executive Director of First Year Experiences and Strategic Initiatives. “Deficit-based is talking about all of the things learners lack, don’t bring, don’t know, support they don’t have. What we are seeing now that works with these learners is identifying the strengths that students do already bring to the university, just within a different context.” Working adult learners balance an array of roles — worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member. They carry rich life experiences that enable them to contextualize and apply otherwise theoretical learnings in ways that enrich and engage the student experience for all.

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4 Journal of Education and Practice, Hidden Curriculum as One of Current Issue of Curriculum, November 30, 2015
Guild’s Learning Solutions advises institutional partners to take a four-stage approach to evaluating their Learner Experience: sense-making, learner journey mapping, learner journey assessment, and solution development, prioritization, and improvement. Taking a measured and thoughtful approach to this evaluation ensures that the changes an institution makes to the LX are based in the realities of learner needs and institutional capabilities, and that highest-impact changes are prioritized as improvements are made.

### The Four Stage Approach to Evaluating and Improving the Learner Experience

1. **Stage 1: Sense-making**
   - **Milestones:** the key steps students take as they move toward program completion, e.g., a student registers for their first semester of courses
   - **Touchpoints:** the points of direct contact between students and institutional stakeholders, e.g., academic coaches send students an automated text on the first day of the semester reminding them that classes are starting
   - **Pain points:** the struggles and challenges that inhibit students’ progress, e.g., appointment times with academic support services are only available during business hours when many working adult learners are unavailable
   - **Success points:** the encounters and experiences that facilitate or accelerate student progress, e.g., students get positive feedback on an assignment within the first week and gain confidence to persist

2. **Stage 2: Learner Journey Mapping**
3. **Stage 3: Learner Journey Assessment**
4. **Stage 4: Solution Development, Prioritization, and Improvement**
Note:
When designing for the improved progression and retention of working adult learners, focus on the following dimensions:

- **Sense of belonging**: students feel a connection to their peers, faculty/staff, and institution overall
- **Understanding of expectations**: students receive clear and timely information and understand what is expected and why
- **Right tools**: students can access the technology, resources, and support systems that will enable them to thrive
- **Confidence & Identity**: students connect with their identity as working learners and feel empowered to achieve success

Throughout the sense-making stage, keep an eye out for the above dimensions as indicators of a successful and supportive LX. We find that this stage works best when it includes **three parts**:

**Part A. Communications audit:**
Reviewing all materials and communications shared with students ensures that we understand the precise messages they receive, from welcome emails on the first day of class to text messages sent by advisors before final exams. This approach surfaces any ambiguities, gaps, or duplications in student communications and ensures that they share cohesive, productive messaging and tone.

**Part B. Interviews:**
A key challenge when considering the full learner journey is to account for all departments and teams who interact with learners. Gathering specifics from faculty and staff about their interactions with students helps identify barriers along the journey and the solutions that might help students overcome them. This allows the capture of the collective impact of communications, resources, and support deployed from all offices, departments, and potential silos across the institution.

The learner’s voice is crucial to corroborate reports from faculty and staff and to gather qualitative, first-person experiences about navigating the journey. As such, it is also important to conduct student interviews with a variety of learners to ensure many voices are represented.
Part C. Persona Development:

Learner personas help visualize the lived experiences of real students and calibrate experience design around them. Informing a persona with specific demographics, motivations, and assets – backed by data and student interviews – helps to center the target population throughout the LX design process.

Though they may have shared identities, all students within a target population will not share the same lived experiences. Thus, personas should not be used as models to stand for rigid and static individuals or groups. Instead, they should situate the work in a way that acknowledges individual variance, creating a nimble LX that can adapt to the dynamic goals, challenges, and aspirations of the diverse student populations the institution serves.

Take a look at this example of a learner persona:

Learner Persona Example

**UNIVERSITY STUDENT ID**

**EMPLOYMENT**
- Employer: Regional retailer
- Age: 34
- Job Title: Cashier
- Work Schedule: 40–60 hours/week

**PERSONAL**
- First-generation college student
- No previous online learning experience
- Has access to computer & smartphone
- Graduated from high school in 2004
- Parent of two kids

“Alyssa” is a persona representing the common demographics of one of the populations of learners that Guild helps institutions serve: she’s a first-generation college student, a first-time college student, and this is her first time learning online. That’s a lot of “firsts” to tackle at once — in addition to working full-time and being a parent. For institutions with limited experience in serving specific populations like these, bringing Alyssa to life ensures that design is attuned to the experiences of those like her.
Stage 2: Learner Journey Mapping

Once all of the disparate pieces of a learner’s experience have been assembled, it is useful to bring those pieces together visually. A visual map of the entire student experience can plot out milestones, touchpoints, pain points, and success points, and can help identify the challenges and bottlenecks along the way. Using a graphic visualization tool like Miro or Mural helps provide an eagle-eye overview of the student journey while allowing users to zoom in on granular details. Here is a high-level example:

A High-Level Example of Learner Journey Mapping

The process of mapping pain points onto milestones is the most important step of the learner journey mapping exercise. It may be a challenge to distinguish a "pain point" from the ordinary and expected effort required within any step in the journey. A good strategy is to look for the moments that exhibit levels of complexity and friction that impede student progress. By the same token, it is important to map success points as well – the features of the journey that enhance or accelerate student progress.

The ultimate goal here is to construct a comprehensive map that is broad enough to encompass the whole student journey and deep enough to provide important details at every step.
Stage 3: Learner Journey Assessment

Once the LX map is complete, the visualization of pain points should reveal opportunity areas for improvement. Key stakeholders should work to align on a few areas with the highest potential for impact – the areas that are most likely to improve the LX. We find that this alignment process is best achieved through a cross-functional, comprehensive LX workshop.

During these workshops, institutional teams should engage in a series of facilitated discussions and activities that generate insights into the learner journey. The collaborative aspect of these workshops is instrumental in surfacing dynamic, multi-pronged solutions.

It is best at this stage to encourage workshop participants to focus on the learner journey map and the pain points and opportunities they see before jumping into solutions. Although great solutions might emerge during this stage, it is best to place them in the “parking lot” for later discussion. Taking the time to collaboratively align on the highest-priority problems helps target the right problems first before rushing into fixes.

“The workshop was key – developing more understanding, collaboratively diagnosing, and prioritizing were all critical steps that set us up for success. Any concerns were addressed along the way already.”

—Dr. Rebecca Murdock, Dean of Bellevue University’s College of Business
Stage 4: Solution Development, Prioritization, and Improvement

After identifying the areas of highest potential impact, the next stage involves developing, prioritizing, and implementing solutions to address them.

Part A. Develop Solutions

Leverage existing research-based approaches to create solutions. You may choose existing or known solutions or build a new, customized solution for your institution. For example, an area of opportunity aimed at improving communications to a particular student population might result in a solution that builds a cohesive, institution-wide communications framework, and shapes all university communications to ensure they are welcoming, empowering, concise, and contextualized. Here is an example framing an approach to improving communications with working adult online learners:

Guidelines for Improving Communication to Working Adult Learners

- **Welcoming, Encouraging Tone:** Written in a voice that gives students a sense of belonging, a feeling of being supported, and a belief in their ability to be successful.
- **Empowering, Asset-Based Framing:** Brings attention to students’ strengths, rather than highlighting their gaps or inadequacies.
- **Comprehensive, Contextualized Guidance:** Communicates information in a way that clearly outlines what students are expected to do and why.
- **Concise, Digestible Presentation:** Presented to students in a way that manages the amount of content they are expected to absorb and clearly draws attention to what is most important.

Sample Message Utilizing LX Communication Guidelines

Hey Alyssa! It’s Sam, your Academic Advisor.

Congrats on starting your first day of classes and taking that initial step towards your degree!

The academic advising office likes to set up a check-in during the first couple weeks of class to make sure you’re happy with your course load and feel like your courses are starting strong. What times next week might work to chat?
**Part B. Prioritize Solutions**

Assess each proposed solution on a simple matrix that plots the potential impact a solution might have on the Learner Experience against the level of effort required for the institution to implement it.

It is best to select initial solutions using a “portfolio” approach: include projects with a range of difficulty levels, and mix longer-term solutions with “quick wins” to build continuous momentum for change.

**Part C. Implement Solutions**

Turning research and planning into effective and enduring change requires several key factors:

- **Executive sponsorship:** Transformation cannot take place in silos – that is exactly the condition that causes many institutions to perpetuate a disjointed Learner Experience. It is crucial that senior leadership provide the oversight needed to ensure cohesion, accountability, resources, and success.

- **Operational execution:** Project teams should have members with the right set of competencies needed to plan and execute their solution(s), and also the skills and institutional influence needed to make change happen.

- **Alignment on metrics:** Defining success and tracking progress ensures a clear understanding of whether or not improvements are happening.

- **Regular impact assessments:** Once you have clear metrics, be sure to regularly assess your progress against them to make sure that you are having the impact you want.

- **Campus-wide communication:** Bringing the campus along is necessary for effective change and builds excitement, leverages more resources, and ensures buy-in.

- **Continuous improvement:** Develop a shared understanding that an effective Learner Experience is fostered through ongoing reflection and effort. The work is never done!
Conclusion

Every institution can better serve working adult learners — and, by extension, all their students — today. The LX evaluation and implementation process outlined here can improve any Learner Experience, especially when addressing resource constraints, difficult transitions, or the needs of specific student populations. By applying LX development frameworks like those developed and refined at Guild, institutions can help working adult learners like Alyssa achieve their learning goals and open greater economic opportunities for themselves and their families than ever before.

Authors

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At Guild, we are working to make education more equitable, accessible, and valuable for working adults. Are you interested in joining us on our mission to educate America's workforce? Please get in touch!