

**NC STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

College of Education  
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

# **MONTGOMERY COUNTY EARLY COLLEGE CASE STUDY REPORT**

20

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Fall 2022, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation partnered with Montgomery County Early College in Troy, NC to pilot two free online professional development courses for educators. The courses, *Foundations of Learner Agency* and *Learner Agency in Practice*, received funding support from the Oak Foundation and were developed by the Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) Team at the Friday Institute.

Montgomery County Early College staff had opportunities to receive professional development as well as hands-on learning opportunities from Friday Institute staff, many of whom are current or former educators. By piloting this program with all educators at the school, Montgomery County Early College can grow its already solid foundation to expand its learner agency work in the coming academic years.

During classroom and PLC observations, the researchers noted the importance of the school's environment, including how it was set up, educators' attitudes towards their students, transitions since the pandemic and student-teacher relationships. Further, the whole school's staff participation in the learner agency professional development were key to successful implementation.

Several practices for engaging students and putting them at the center of their own learning stood out. The major findings included providing students with freedoms while maintaining a structure that is not too rigid, putting students at the forefront of decisions and choices, and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning to understand how their choices impact their future.

# INTRODUCTION

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In Fall 2022, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation partnered with Montgomery County Early College (MCEC) to pilot two free online professional development courses for educators about learner agency. The courses, *Foundations of Learner Agency* and *Learner Agency in Practice*, received funding support from the Oak Foundation. They were developed by the Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) Team at the Friday Institute.

Together with the PLLC team, the Program Evaluation and Education Research (PEER) Group reached out to its contacts at MCEC to discuss a partnership. After initial discussions, the MCEC team enthusiastically agreed to launch the Learner Agency courses on a voluntary basis with the school's educators. The PLLC team led an information session in August, and the PEER Group contributed a short video to explain the research aspect of the study. Educators were encouraged to join, and they were provided with incentives to join, including continuing education units (CEUs) and a \$250 stipend, paid out by the Friday Institute.

Sixteen educators enrolled in the Learner Agency pilot program, which lasted between August 2022 - June 2023. Throughout the partnership, the PLLC team led an additional four professional development sessions with the goals of understanding educators' progress, answering questions about learner agency and the online modules, and encouraging them to reflect with one another about what they had learned and how they were implementing what they had learned into their instruction.

During these professional development sessions, members of the PEER Group observed and took fieldnotes. Additionally, the PEER Group conducted classroom observations on four different days between October through May. At the end of the school year, the PEER Group conducted two focus groups with educators enrolled in the course. Educators were also given the opportunity to complete a survey to share additional thoughts about their experiences in the online course.

# THE INTERVENTION

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Educators at MCEC participated in two separate learning modules related to Learner Agency: *Foundations of Learner Agency* and *Learner Agency in Practice*. Below is a brief overview of each of the two courses.

## FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNER AGENCY

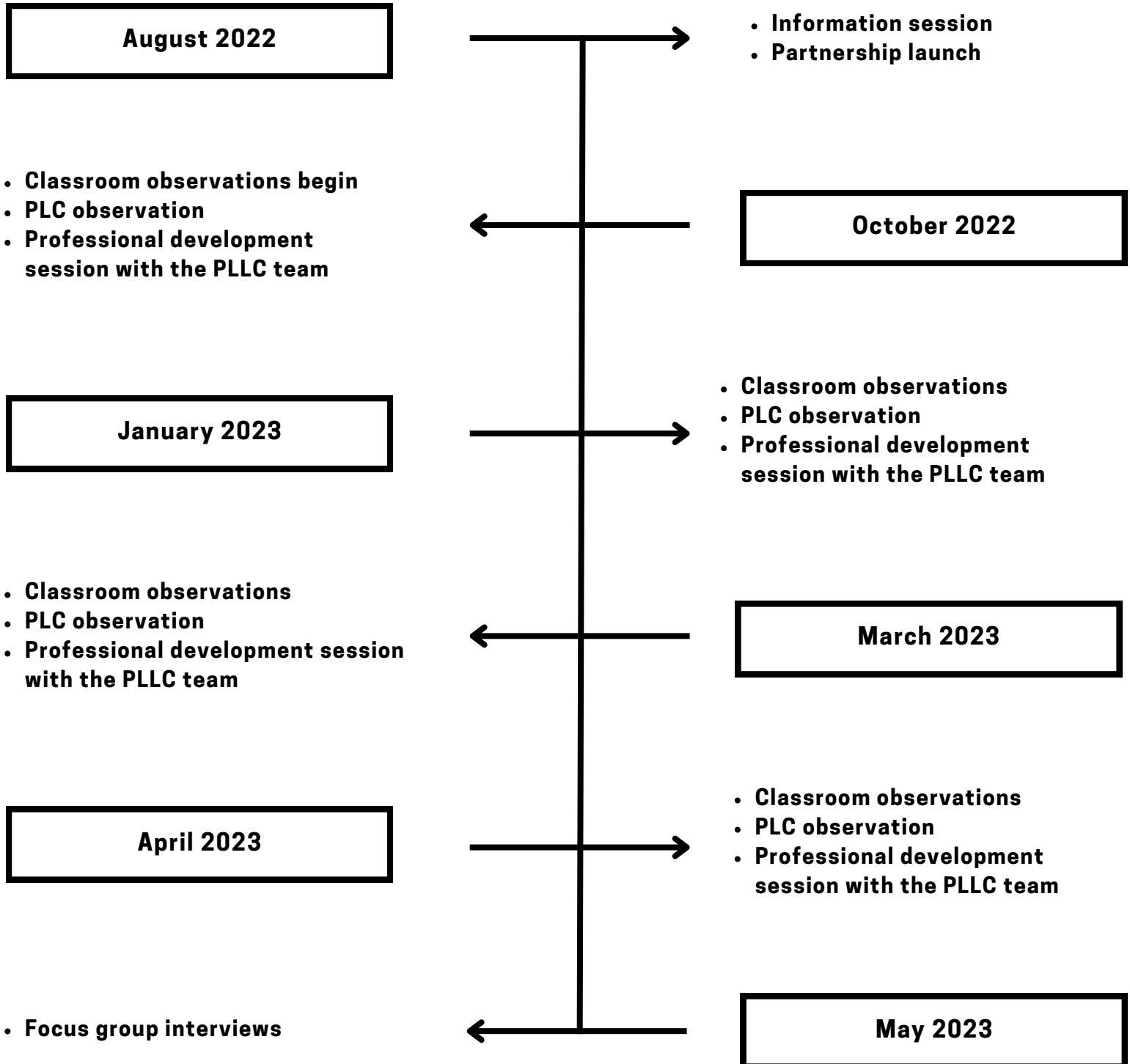
This online, ten-hour course accessible through the Friday Institute's [The Place](#) platform, is free for participants. Its purpose is to help educators build an understanding of what learner agency is and to help them make their own meaning of the term. Further, as the PLLC describes on the website, incorporating learner agency into the classroom "is of particular importance for our students of color and historically marginalized students." Throughout the course, educators have opportunities to learn mindsets, skills, and contexts that contribute to learner agency, and they are provided with options for how to incorporate learner agency-centric practices in their classrooms. They are encouraged to try different strategies with the understanding that it is okay to fail.

## LEARNER AGENCY IN PRACTICE

This second online, ten-hour course is also accessible through the Friday Institute's [The Place](#) platform. It is a follow-up to the *Foundations of Learner Agency* module, and it has the goal of helping participants take what they learned from the first course and apply it to their classrooms. Further, participation in discussion forums is highly encouraged so that educators can learn from and respond to other educators from around the country/world who are also enrolled in the course. During this course, participants learn about putting students at the center of their own learning; asking for direct feedback from students about ways they see learner agency impacting their own learning; and growing their understanding of how concepts like power, agency, and bias work together. Finally, participants are highly encouraged to self-reflect on how the changes they made regarding learner agency impacted their instruction and their students' learning.

# TIMELINE

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# METHODS

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## CASE STUDY METHOD

The research team used a case study methodology to complete this study. Case study research aims to understand and comprehend the context of a phenomenon within real-world conditions through the collection and analysis of multiple forms of data (Schoch, 2020). According to Merriam (2007), “by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study focuses on holistic description and explanation” (p.29). Case study emphasizes the idea of “bounding a case” where defining the time, place, activity, and/or context of the research is necessary to describe the unit of analysis being studied (Tight, 2017).

For this study, the learner agency online modules served as the particular case and intervention being evaluated. Through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews, focus groups, observations, classroom documents, field notes, and open-ended survey responses, we aimed to capture the impact and implementation of learner agency in the classroom among educators and students.

## FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

At the conclusion of MCEC educators’ participation in the online learner agency modules, PEER Group researchers conducted two focus group interviews with fourteen educators who participated in the program. This included classroom teachers, the school principal, the school counselor, and the leader of the teaching cadets program. Interviews lasted between 34 and 46 minutes. Questions surrounded topics such as teacher learning, student learning, knowledge and appreciation of learner agency, changes to instructional planning, changes in instruction, student level changes, and module improvement. A copy of the focus group interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

# METHODS

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## ARTIFACTS

The team analyzed additional artifacts during this study, which included student work, teachers' lesson plans and assignments, and fieldnotes from classroom and PLC observations.

## STUDENT WORK

Staff shared examples of their students' work. These projects demonstrated how educators had intentionally incorporated aspects of learner agency, which oftentimes included offering students the choice to select different topics that would interest them.

## LESSON PLANS AND ASSIGNMENTS

During site visits, teachers shared different lesson plans or assignments with the researchers. They demonstrated how they had implemented aspects of learner agency within their classrooms. Teachers showed how they were intentional about providing students with various options of final products that they could submit.

## FIELDNOTES

Throughout the researchers' visits to MCEC, they took extensive fieldnotes during classroom observations as well as during the PLCs led by the Friday Institute's PLLC team. Fieldnotes were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative coding software, which helped the researchers identify major themes in the data.

## EXIT SURVEY

Educators were given a survey upon completing the learner agency pilot program. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, and these data supplemented findings from the focus groups and classroom observations.

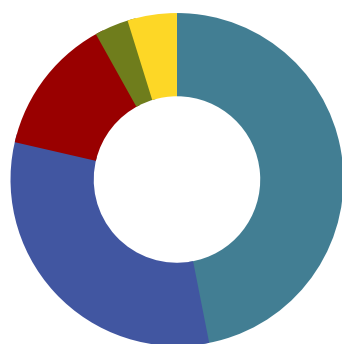
## MEMBER CHECKING

To ensure that the analyses of the data were an accurate reflection of the school's work in the learner agency modules, the researchers asked the main school contact at MCEC to provide feedback on the team's findings.

# SCHOOL PROFILE

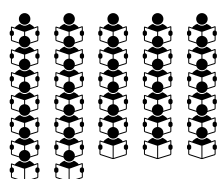
## MONTGOMERY COUNTY EARLY COLLEGE

MCEC is a non-traditional, public secondary school in Troy, NC founded in 2017. Located on the Montgomery Community College campus, its student population of 265 have opportunities to take classes at the community college, which provides them with college credits. Data below come from U.S. News and World Report (2023).

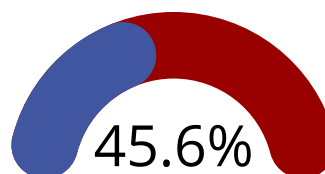


### Student Demographics

- 46.9% White
- 31.7% Hispanic/Latino
- 13.3% Black or African American
- 4.8% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander
- 3.3% Two or more races



~27:1 student to teacher ratio



Almost half of all students are economically disadvantaged.

## PARTICIPATION IN THE LEARNER AGENCY MODULE

The partnership between the Friday Institute and MCEC was mutually beneficial. The Friday Institute had opportunities to better understand how its online courses were being used by professional educators. This knowledge was helpful not only for improving current courses, but also for developing new courses. Opportunities to directly work with educators and listen to their feedback allowed the Friday Institute to deliver useful and usable information to educators who work with students every day.

MCEC staff had opportunities to receive professional development as well as hands-on learning opportunities from Friday Institute staff, many of whom are current or former educators. Further, this year-long professional development opportunity aligned with the work that MCEC was already doing in trying to put learning into the hands of their students. By piloting this program with the entire MCEC staff, it helped provide a common language surrounding the topic of learner agency.

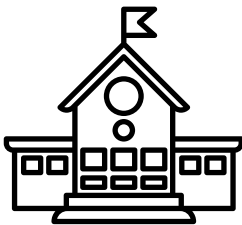
# FINDINGS

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This section details the findings from MCEC’s participation in the online Learner Agency modules. While findings from this case study are not generalizable, they have the potential to help educators at other schools who are considering implementing a professional development, or specifically, this particular online learning course.

## WHAT FACTORS OR INTERVENTIONS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNER VARIABILITY PROGRAM IN A SCHOOL?

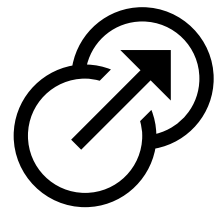
This study contained two aspects: program evaluation and research. As the PLLC team was piloting the learner agency online modules to gain an understanding of which aspects of the course worked and which should be improved, the PEER Group studied the learner agency program through the lens of program implementation and improvement. Specifically, the PEER Group hoped to gain an understanding of which specific components contribute to the successful implementation of the learner agency program at a school. Researchers noted the importance of the school’s environment, including how it was set up, educators’ attitudes towards their students, transitions since the pandemic and student-teacher relationships. Further, the whole school’s staff participation in the learner agency professional development were key to successful implementation.



School setup



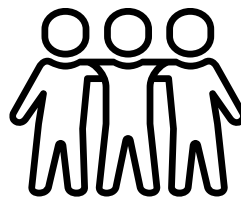
Educator attitudes



Pandemic transitions



Student-teacher relationships



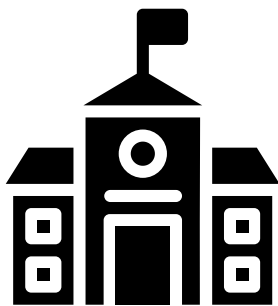
Whole school participation

# SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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**School Setup.** The background of Montgomery County Early College played an important role in developing a culture of student-driven learning. One of the goals when the school was established was to offer students a variation on the traditional high school experience, giving students opportunities to take advanced classes and have more agency over their own learning. To encourage the notion that learning is important and that anyone from any background has the potential to learn, educators emphasized the importance of having their students lead by example. As one educator explained, all students had opportunities to be leaders and role models to younger students.

*Someone noted that when they started the school, they wanted it to be student driven. They oftentimes have upperclassmen join into freshmen classes and support their learning because “being smart is okay.” Some seniors who stop by were not standout students, and it is a type of organic leadership. Upperclassmen will often come into a room for help on questions, and sophomores see that they have questions, so this modeling shows it’s okay to not know an answer. – PLC fieldnotes*



**Educator attitudes.** The ways that educators spoke about and viewed their students was noticeable throughout the fieldwork. They overall believed in their students. They frequently noted how proud they were that the kids they taught had progressed since the pandemic. Educators were also impressed by how their students approached learner agency in ways that demonstrated they took responsibility for their own learning.

# SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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**Pandemic transitions.** While sometimes showing frustration with their students, particularly in trying to recover after the pandemic, educators recognized and appreciated the progress their students had made since the pandemic. Further, they made the connection between the school's structure and pandemic recovery. Observations and conversations with teachers indicated that students of different grade levels have opportunities to learn from one another. Freshmen saw examples from seniors of how to act. Further, working with freshmen provided seniors with leadership experiences and opportunities to further develop their own agency.

*They needed the structure. Now we're giving that back to them. We did graduation last night. They just blew us away. Blew us away. Our freshmen are learning from our upperclassmen and our sophomores are learning from our upperclassmen. I think we're getting back to the culture of the kids being in control. – Montgomery County Early College Educator*

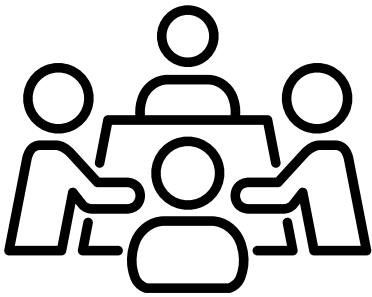
**Student-teacher relationships.** The school had a more flexible structure than traditional public high schools. For example, as it was located on a community college campus and students took college-level courses, they were frequently in and out of the building. Because of challenges with aligning schedules, students frequently walked into their high school courses late, yet teachers treated this as normal and knew what their students needed.

Additionally, educators made great efforts to get to know their students as people. They knew what they were interested in, and they took the responsibility of developing strong relationships with them seriously. During observations, the researchers noticed that teachers met students' needs at an individual level. For example, one teacher allowed a student who had been in her class the previous year to drop by her classroom throughout the day. The teacher managed to check in with her student to make sure he was doing okay while also maintaining her own classroom of students. The teacher explained to the researchers later that she and the teacher whose class the student left had discussed this, and they agreed that this was an accommodation that would best meet the student's needs.

# WHOLE SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

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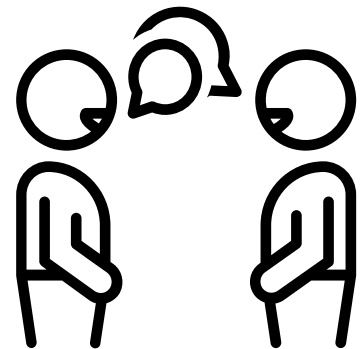
MCEC is a small school with a small number of staff members. Observations at the school clearly indicated that there was a team mentality, where teachers often collaborated and worked with one another. Their involvement in the learner agency online courses was no exception. All classroom teachers, as well as administrators and the counselor, participated in the courses and PLC professional development discussions with Friday Institute staff. Whole school participation, though at independent paces through the asynchronous online module, appeared to be valuable.



*... we did the mods independently, and then I know myself, as soon as I got done with a mod, I'd go over next door to another teacher and talk to her about it and say, "Have you done it yet? What were your thoughts on it," and then see if there was anybody else who had done a discussion board that I could reply to yet, things like that. So, that's how I did it, just making sure that I was keeping up with other people in the building, and then we would have outside discussions on things we thought about. – Montgomery County Early College Educator*

Throughout in-person observations, the researchers noted how teachers frequently hung out in the hallway together and engaged in discussions with each other.

*Not formal, but we all get together every afternoon. We get together in the hallway and sit and talk about things. So, when we would get a module and we were talking about it and discussing it, and [NAME] made the survey and we were all really surprised that the kids really liked it here or they were really positive about everything. That's the stuff we talked about. – Montgomery County Early College Educator*



# WHOLE SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

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The advantages of these discussions became even more clear during PLCs and focus group discussions. Teachers noted how useful it was to take the course together. While they were already incorporating ideas of learner agency into their classroom instruction, they realized after taking the learner agency courses that they previously did not have the language or vocabulary for the practices they were implementing.

*A lot of the things, we may not use the words, "Learner Agency," but a lot of the things that we do, we are already embedding them in. We just might not call it Learner Agency. A lot of the things that we do here aren't in a formal setting. I think that's what makes it successful, because we talk about what we need when we need it...*

– Montgomery County Early College Educator

As the whole team took the course together, however, it provided the entire staff with a common vocabulary they could use when discussing ideas surrounding learner agency.

*But while I was doing some of the mods, I would talk to my kids about things that I was actively engaged in on my discussion boards with my other coworkers. And then the kids were like, well, what are y'all doing? And so we would tell them what each session was about and they're like, oh, well we feel like you guys do that. And they were putting their input on things that we were talking about.*

*So not only did I talk to other teachers in my building, but I talked to my students as well. And I know that [TEACHER NAME] did the same thing because when I talked to the kids, they were like, they would tell me what [TEACHER NAME] was doing too. Oh, you're doing the same thing that [TEACHER NAME]. So I said, yeah, we're all doing it. So they knew what we were talking about when we started talking about things. And so I thought that's part of putting that vocabulary to it, Learner Agency. I didn't have a word for it either, but us even having these conversations, open conversations with our students, they understand what professional development we're doing. I think that's part of what Learner agency even is.*

– Montgomery County Early College Educator

Interestingly, this example shows that engaging in the learner agency course was truly a whole school experience. While teachers were engaging in conversations with one another about topics in the course, they also shared with their students how they were participating. Through this communication, they demonstrated how they valued their students' voices and opinions by including them.

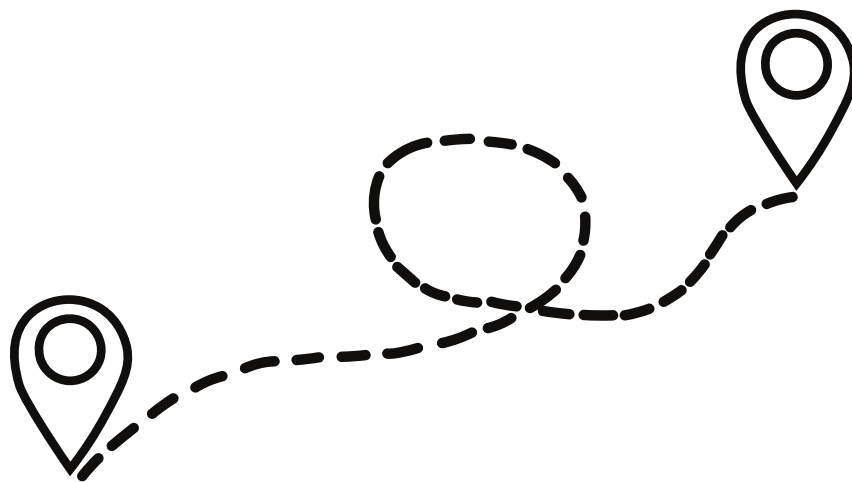


# WHOLE SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

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By sharing what teachers were doing with students, they led by example, modeling how they were working to put students first. They normalized to their students that they were on learning journeys, with the ultimate goal of improving their practice to be better educators for them.

*But our kids, since we're so new about early college, we've only been over five years now, but they're used to being observed. So I think that that was a nice component to it to have you guys on campus so they can see how we are trying to even better ourselves a little bit. – Montgomery County Early College Educator*



Engaging in a year-long professional development opportunity as a school staff was a clear advantage for MCEC. While it is unclear if this type of professional development would be possible for a school with a much larger staff to engage in together, MCEC showed that they were set up and had undertaken steps prior to program implementation, which contributed to their success.

# FINDINGS

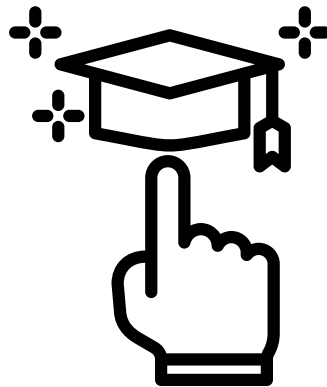
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## WHAT ARE PROMISING PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS, IN METACOGNITION, AGENCY, AND ADVOCACY?

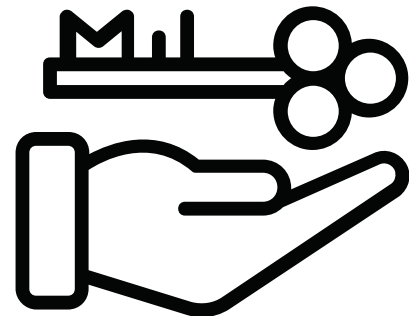
Throughout the classroom and PLC observations as well as during focus group and one-on-one interviews, several practices for engaging students and putting them at the center of their own learning stood out. The major findings included providing students with freedoms while maintaining a structure that is not too rigid, putting students at the forefront of decisions and choices, and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning to understand how their choices impact their future.



**Structured freedom**



**Putting students first**



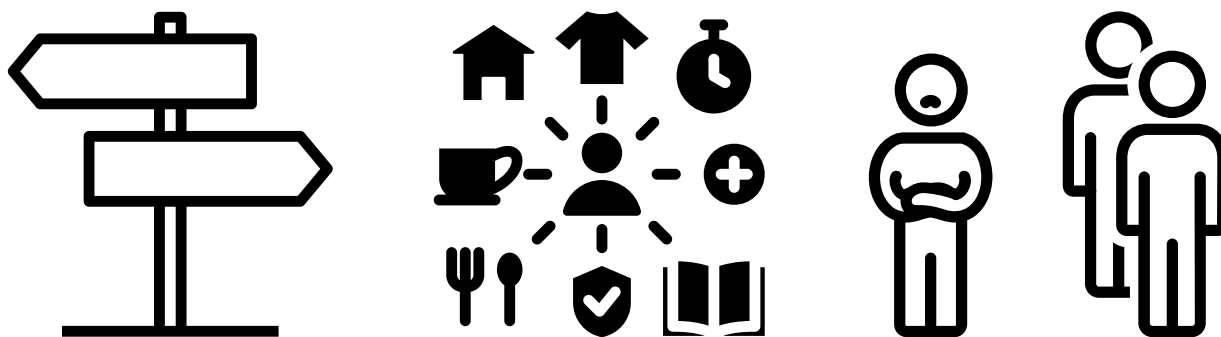
**Student responsibility**

# STRUCTURED FREEDOM

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At Montgomery County Early College, educators frequently offered their students choices. This could be seen throughout the site visits, where the researchers witnessed educators asking students to choose different topics of study. It was not only the actual assignments in which students had choices. They were also granted freedoms to choose partners to work with, or they could even decide to work independently if that was their preference. Further, educators were understanding of when their students needed a moment to reset, allowing them to go and visit other classrooms if necessary. As researchers noted in their fieldnotes, after one student stopped by her class in the middle of teaching:

*... he stops by every day because he needs a brain break.* – Excerpt from Observation Fieldnotes



Related to teachers developing strong relationships with their students, teachers made efforts to provide choices for their students that would benefit their learning. While these activities no doubt caused extra work on behalf of the teachers, they viewed it as important to student learning.

# STRUCTURED FREEDOM

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In one English class, the researchers noticed that there were student-created posters on the wall. When the teacher saw this, she explained that rather than having all of her students read the same book, they were each given the option to choose their own book. As the teacher shared during a focus group interview:

*... when my students did the project-based learning this time they did, it was a really big project with several pieces, six pieces to the project. But from the very first day that we talked about it, I explained to them what standards we needed to address. And I talked to them about the project itself, what it looked like. And it was REHUGO Project that the kids did, and it's reading, entertainment, history, universal Truth, government and opinion. And we started to talk about it and I was telling them that they'd have to read a novel and here's some criteria that I've used in the past, what do you think about it? And we actually went through and they gave input on every step. I mean every step, our h and r G for history and government became current events because they were already enrolled in American history.*

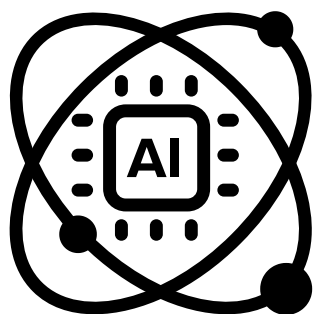
*And they were like, but Miss can, instead of doing history looking back, we just did a whole course in history. Can we look for current events that are attached to our universal theme that we can see threaded through the novel? But I was really so proud, and this was a three-week project, but over the course of those three weeks, they read a book with 300 pages or more self-selected text. They took tests on the book, they journaled about it, they found entertainment related to it. They followed this universal truth throughout every piece of all of it and then gave their opinions on it. But I think what struck me most is the level of engagement. I literally took pictures one day of the class because it's normally never quiet in here. And it was quiet, literally we have carpet, but quiet as a pin dropping honestly, because everybody was in the room just reading.*

*And I'm an English teacher, but for me it was so powerful because there were no complaints about the reading, nobody trying to skirt it and not do it. When they had to journal, I literally had to change their journals to these forms so they wouldn't write so much that I couldn't read it all. I didn't have time to read it all before the next journals were due. The kids responded so well. And as [NAME] commented, they knew that my aim was to increase their agency. My aim was to give them more choice, more voice, more input into what we did. And then they just did it. And I really like it because I do think that they are the most important stakeholders in our building. And I do think that when they can understand both the purpose of what we're doing and can have input on how it's done, they're just more willing just as all of us are when people ask us.*

– Montgomery County Early College Educator

# STRUCTURED FREEDOM

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The same teacher told the students that they had done such good work that they did not need to take an end-of-unit test. Wanting to prove the amount they had learned, the students asked the teacher if they could take a test. As this would have required the teacher to create many personalized versions of a test, she used this as an additional learning opportunity. Rather than skirting away from artificial intelligence technology, she had students use ChatGPT to see if the software's summaries of their books were correct. Students then had to make revisions where ChatGPT made mistakes. This example showed how the educator adapted her teaching to allow for more student choice, provided students with opportunities to engage deeply with course material, and used this as a learning opportunity for both her students and herself to learn about new technology.

Educators knew their students were genuinely engaged in their learning when conversations between kids surrounded school subjects. Through offering students more choice, and by introducing learner agency in structured ways, kids were engaged in their learning.

*I was going to say her students did very well with that PBL project. The conversations they were having in her classroom, but also in my classroom about what they were talking about. And [teacher name] was talking about in a safe way. I think that they really did feel like they had some voice in what they were doing. It was the topic that they were interested in. And you can tell that because it spilled over into a different class period, my math class. And so they come in still talking about chemistry. That's the goal. They're not talking about what they're doing over the weekend, they're talking about the class they just got out of, which I think is the goal.*  
– Montgomery County Early College Educator



# STRUCTURED FREEDOM

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As students continued through their high school careers, they recognized that they had more opportunities for learner agency at the early college than they would have at the traditional high school next door. By the time students were seniors, they had seen differences between the two high school experiences, and they appreciated how their teachers provided them with trust and more responsibility.

*I think I see that with our seniors who just graduated last night. I think that there is an appreciation that grows for that. The more time that they spend here, the more that they interact with this... The more freedom that we give them... I think part of it is right next door, basically sharing almost the same campus with our central traditional high school. I hear from some of the seniors, they realize that they get a lot more freedom and a lot more choice in their day than the kids at the central high school do. I know from the upperclassmen, they tend to be more aware of that and maybe a little more appreciative of it. – Montgomery County Early College Educator*

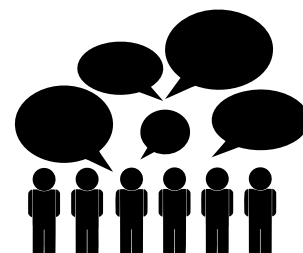


# PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

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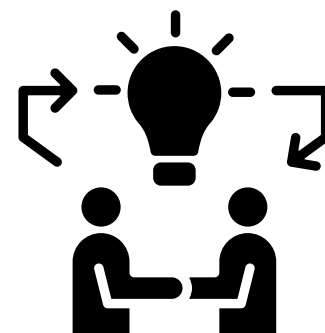
As the year progressed, teachers saw their students grow in their ability to voice what they needed, and teachers were able to address their needs. For example, during one PLC discussion, the research team listened as a teacher spoke about how their students were growing their abilities to voice their fears and concerns about their own learning:

*T[teachers] listen to those fears and give students what they are asking for and build that into the curriculum. – PLC fieldnotes*



At first, it was difficult for educators to share power with their students, who were not experts in the subject. Rather, teachers saw themselves as being the most knowledgeable, especially as students were new to the subjects and unaware of the ultimate learning goal. However, teachers began recognizing that while students may not be experts in the subject, when given opportunities to reflect on their own learning, students can voice what they need, and teachers can work with that to respond appropriately while progressing through the curriculum.

*But that was my first hesitant part of it. But throughout this year, how it's grown, I think that they really did a good job of stepping up. Like [TEACHER NAME] was saying, I know what I need as an adult, but how does a kid know what they need in a classroom? They've never taken this math class before. They don't know what's to come, so how can they say what they need? But they really did talk about like, oh, we need more time on this, or they need more time doing something. But they voiced what they needed from me and I voiced what I needed from them. And yes, they did rise to the challenge and they worked hard every single day. – Montgomery County Early College Educator*



This example displays the give-and-take relationship teachers and their students have, which contributed to effective learning. When students had the skills, as well as a teacher who was willing to not only listen but make efforts to change, learning occurred.



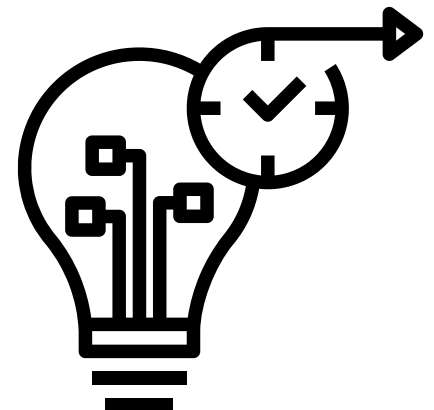
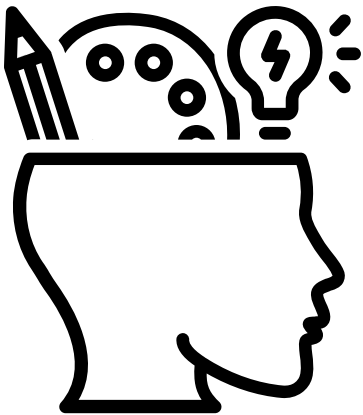
# PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

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Teachers used their students' interests to drive their assignments, tailoring them to each student's needs. Educators at the school recognized that not every one of their students planned on attending college. They emphasized to their students that while some may not be pursuing further education, there were important skills they could learn in school that would be applicable to their future careers. During observations, teachers explained this choice, which were recorded through field notes:

*In English class, rather than picking a piece of literature, the teacher gave them workplace reading because they were not planning on going to college. She said that by the end of the semester, the kids were not missing any assignments and their GPAs went up.*

– Excerpt from observation fieldnotes





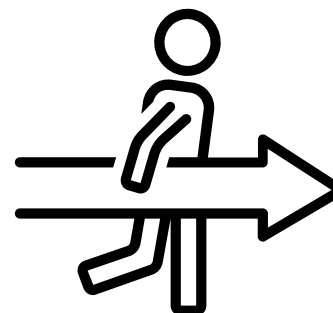
# STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

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When students gained the trust of their teachers, and as teachers learned more about how to implement learner agency in the classrooms, students were given increased responsibility over their own learning. Oftentimes, as has been indicated throughout this report, offering students more choice helped them become more engaged in their learning. When they could provide input, and when teachers genuinely listened, students grew in how to become more responsible learners who were aware of their learning needs. Even though teachers were pressed for time, especially in core courses where they must cover many standards in a short period of time, they saw the advantages of giving their students ownership over their own learning.

*At first I was back in when we started this, I was like, well, how do you give student voice in a math classroom when you have 93 standards to teach and like [NAME] was saying, and I have very specific goals that I have to reach. And so then I'm like, well, I'm saying "I" a lot, but the kids have to reach that. So they have some kind of say in that. But what impressed me the most about the kids is anytime I gave them choice, their choice was to actually do something over. Let's just not, because anytime you have a big say in something, you're like, well, if we could not do it, why would you not do it? And so as soon as I gave them some options of that, I was worried that they would think that they had the option to not do something, but they rose to the challenge and they took on everything that I've asked of them. And then they gave me plenty of ideas.*

– Montgomery County Early College Educator



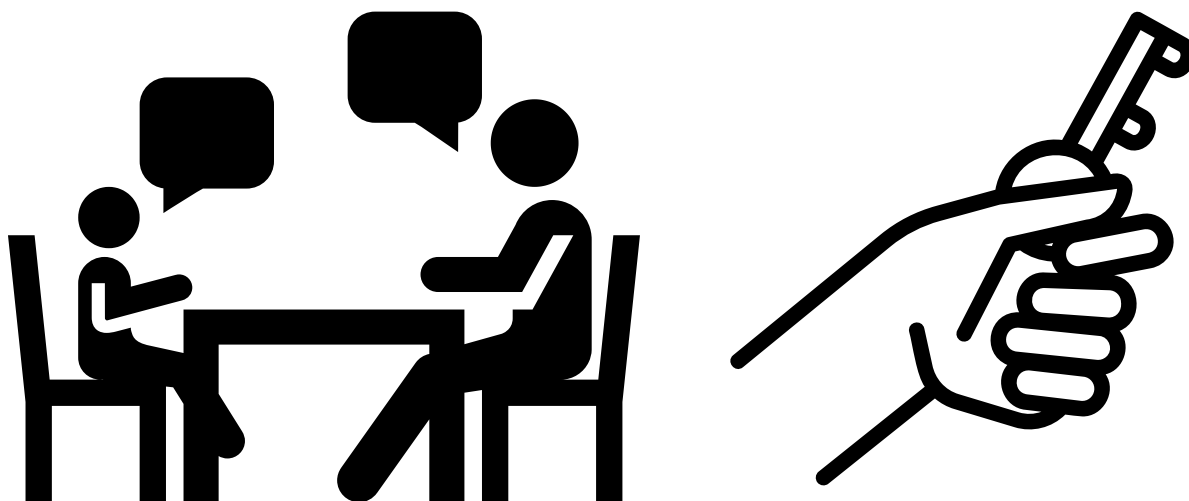
# STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

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Not only did students increase their understanding of what they needed for more learner agency, but their knowledge of learner agency also resulted in a greater understanding of their performance overall. They were able to logically connect how the work they chose to do, or did not do, impacted them in the long run.

*Well, in the counselor office, they're talking about it more. They're trying to understand, "Well, no, I understand. I didn't do seven assignments. That's why I'm in this [situation]." Instead of making excuses as to why they didn't do it. So from my perspective, I'm seeing a difference there. – Quote from Montgomery County Early College Educator*

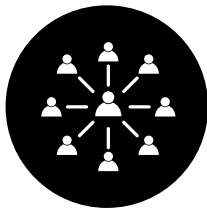
As this quote indicates, students could see how their choices had real consequences. Rather than being scolded or told what they had done wrong, students owned their mistakes. They saw themselves as an individual agent who had consciously made decisions that put them in certain situations.



# LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

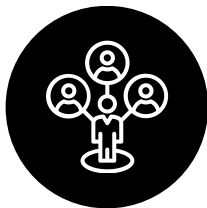
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The learner agency pilot project at MCEC led to insights and suggestions for successfully implementing this type of professional development program in a school. MCEC and its teachers experienced many successes in putting learner agency at the forefront, and below are suggestions for ways to continue building upon that success in the coming years.



## **01 — Engage all educators.**

It was beneficial for all of the educators to participate in the learner agency module. Through doing this course as a cohort model, school staff had a common language from which to draw from when talking about learner agency. Further, it was obvious that teachers were already having conversations with each other about ways to help their students, both formally and informally. Adding in a professional development such as this enhanced and furthered these discussions.



## **02 — Emphasize positive student-teacher relationships.**

Students felt comfortable in classrooms throughout Montgomery because of the environment the staff had created for them. Staff encouraged their students to do their best, spoke to and about them positively, and treated them with respect. This contributed to strong relationships between students and teachers, which contributed to educators' abilities to meet their students' needs because they knew their students on a personal level.

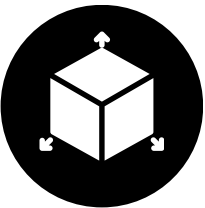
# LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

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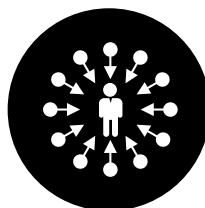
## **03 — Encourage student choice and responsibility.**

Giving students opportunities to make their own choices in their learning was a positive experience, and encouraging this in the future would be beneficial. Not only did students learn how to make decisions through the choices they were provided, but they also took on responsibility for their own learning, understanding that there were consequences to their actions.



## **04 — Maintain structure while offering freedom.**

A unique aspect of MCEC was its structure. Located next to the regular public high school and on the community college's campus, it offered an atypical learning environment for its students. Students were in and out of the building due to classes on other parts of the campus, but they were also in and out of classrooms due to their individualized needs. Educators allowed their students to have "brain breaks" or let them work independently. This trust between student and teacher contributed to the positive culture and strong student-teacher relationships.



## **05 — Keep students at the center.**

Ensuring that students remain at the center of learning is essential for maintaining the successes at MCEC. Continuing to encourage teachers to create assignments and work within the curriculum to engage their students on a personalized level will contribute to the positive experiences students have during their time in high school.

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# APPENDIX A

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**NC STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

College of Education  
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

fi.ncsu.edu

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Raleigh, NC 27606  
P: 919.513.8500

## INTRO AND CONSENT

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet today. My name is [NAME], and I work as research staff at The Friday Institute, part of the NC State College of Education.

Today, we are seeking to hear from you all about your involvement in the two Learner Agency modules. We will use the information from our discussion today to inform the Friday Institute professional development team about strengths of the online modules, as well as opportunities for growth. Our conversation will center around ways educators have incorporated aspects of the online modules to meet their students' unique needs.

With your consent, we would like to record our conversation today to aid in my note taking. Recording the conversation allows us to fully capture exact wording and themes that come up in our conversation today. Our conversation should take about **30-45 minutes** and will be kept confidential, in that no identifying information will be shared with partners - only major themes taken from the conversation. Do I have your consent to record?

[HIT RECORD]

For the purposes of our recording, I am going to introduce myself, and then if we could go around and introduce yourself, that would be great!

**EQ1. Implementation. What factors or interventions are needed to support the implementation of the Learner Variability program in a school?**

Facilitate teacher learning

1. How has the Learner Agency course been implemented in your school?
2. How did you become involved with the Learner Agency course? Walk me through the process of your participation in the Learner Agency course.
3. Tell me about the PD and coaching you received as a part of the Learner Agency course.

Facilitate student learning

1. How have your students been involved with implementation of the Learner Agency course?

**EQ2. Impact. What are promising practices for engaging all students, especially those from underrepresented groups, in metacognition, agency, and advocacy?**

Increased knowledge and appreciation of learner agency (self)

1. Has your participation in the Learner Agency course changed your perception of teaching? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Changes in planning

1. Has your participation in the Learner Agency course impacted the way in which you plan instruction? Use technology?

Changes in instruction

1. Has your participation in the Learner Agency course allowed you to improve your classroom instruction? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Student level changes

1. In what ways has the implementation of the Learner Agency course impacted your students' learning?
  - a. Probe: Have you noticed a change in knowledge of and appreciation for their own agency?
  - b. Probe: Have you noticed a change in your students' self-awareness of learning strengths and challenges?
  - c. Probe: Have you noticed a change in your students' awareness and use of strategies to support learning needs?
  - d. Probe: Have you noticed a change in your students' communication to teachers and peers about learner agency?
2. Have you noticed a change in your students' ability to advocate for their learning needs? Explain.

3. What were the most beneficial instructional practices you will take from this course?
4. What strategies from the course can you use to engage underrepresented students?

Improvement

1. What was most satisfying for you as a learner?
2. What was most challenging for you as a learner?
3. What improvements to the module would you suggest?
  - a. Probe:What should we know about the user experience of completing this module?

Thank you so much for your time and attention today! We truly appreciate you sharing your experiences with us. Before we close, we'd like to open up the discussion for any final thoughts. Is there anything you would like to share that we didn't ask you?