



# Learner Engagement Challenges & Solutions

In Spring 2023, GOAL Collective’s Learner Engagement Working Group interviewed partner agencies to document learner engagement challenges, perspectives, and solutions. The purposes of this project were to:

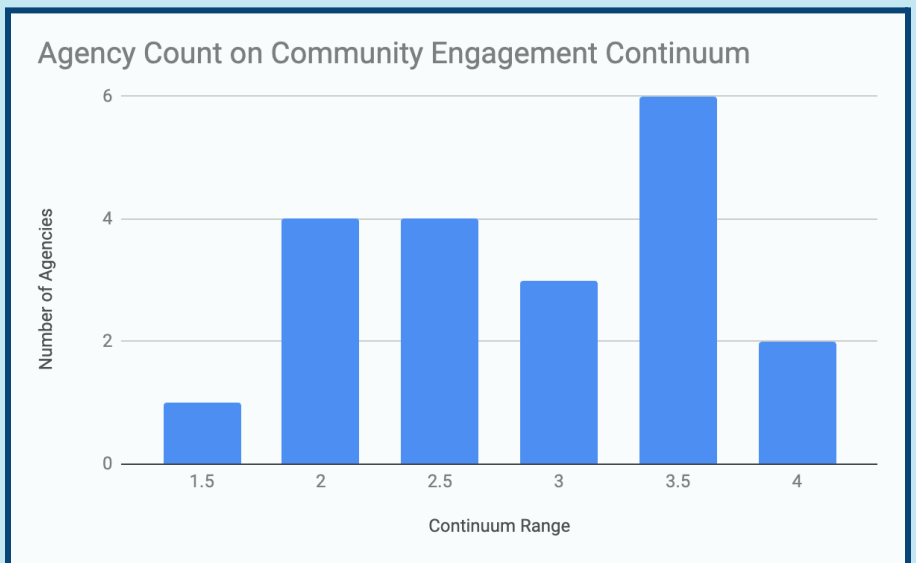
- Define “learner engagement” and its importance in GOAL partners’ adult education programs
- Identify partner agencies’ learner engagement activities and best practices
- Determine the current level of learner engagement at partner agencies
- Explore common challenges to learner engagement
- Leverage partner activities toward GOAL’s desired outcome of learners regularly participating in decision making

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

20 GOAL partner agencies responded to our request for interviews and provided information. Members were asked to rate their programs on the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#), with the scale of:

**0 = Ignore > 1 = Inform > 2 = Consult > 3 = Involve > 4 = Collaborate > 5 = Defer To**

The average of all partner ratings was **2.875**, advancing beyond the Consultation phase and nearing the Involvement stage. Most organizations identify themselves within a couple of stages in the spectrum. Differences are based on specific programs in comparison to the organization as a whole. The trend shows that more advanced or individualized learners are offered more opportunities to provide input and engage in decision-making processes.



**Capturing learner voice to inform programs requires consideration of the populations served and the formats that will best overcome the barriers that learners face**, while providing the most meaningful information or engagement. Most agencies employ some form of a survey, many have opportunities for learners to gather for discussion, and almost all receive feedback informally through one-on-one contacts.

**Different modalities should be considered to obtain a wider range of input.** For instance, in-person-only modalities might not capture the extent of transportation challenges, whereas obtaining this feedback from virtual students as well might better portray the experiences of the full learner community. Likewise, if informal feedback is prioritized, remote learners with less informal contact may be underrepresented. Organizations should critically assess their feedback mechanisms to address unseen barriers.

## CHALLENGES TO INCORPORATING MORE LEARNER VOICE

- **Student/Client Challenges**
  - Level of literacy
  - Reluctance to speak up
  - Learner time constraints
  - Need for incentives to provide feedback
- **Organizational Challenges**
  - Staff time constraints and capacity
  - Operational/cultural change to solicit/incorporate learner voice
  - Difficulty tracking students post-completion
  - Mode of feedback
  - How to scale, collect, and store input
  - Capturing full range of feedback
  - Voluntary feedback vs. incentivized feedback
  - Remote vs. in-person programs

## METHODS PARTNERS USE TO INCORPORATE LEARNER VOICE

- Formal surveys of students/clients
- 1:1 interviews/organic discussions with learners
- Student/Family Advisory Council/Board
- Community forums/meetings
- Observing behaviors such as attendance
- Learner goal sheets
- Assessments
- Setting class expectations with learners
- Invitation to assist with strategic planning
- Financial incentives to participate
- Client stories
- Newsletters for learners where students submit articles
- Social media

## KEY LEARNER CHALLENGE: TIME/CAPACITY

**Learners are busy** with families, work, transportation, financial, and health issues. Students sometimes work multiple jobs. Engagement in the actual program of study may be all that they have time for. At least one agency expressed concern that extensive learner engagement activities are a distraction for students whose first priority is completion of their programs, noting that class attendance alone can be a challenge.

*Suggestions from partners to address the key challenge students face of limited time and capacity include:*

- Provide equitable **compensation** or resources afforded to staff members engaged in the same work.
- Make **flexibility** a possibility:
  - If a learner is busy at a meeting time, explore ways that they can still participate.
  - Create an online forum or group to continue the conversation when convenient.
- Reduce time commitment with **online meetings**; augment with “office hours” where instructors are paired with specific learners to engage them for 1:1 tutoring or small group instruction or conversation.
- Be able to answer the frequent question busy learners have about participating: **“What’s in it for me?”**
- Conduct surveys to build realistic goal setting and have **informed expectations** for what a learning environment looks like at home or in person for the individual.
- Offer lecture **videos** to students to support autonomous learning and provide feedback; this has been found by a partner to be a critical solution in expanding student engagement.
- Work with the learner to create a **checklist for time management**/goal setting (e.g. an instructor and paired student determine that they will meet twice a week online via Zoom; instructor develops a checklist for missed or attended classes, visually reviews it with the learner, and assists them to develop a plan of action to help more broadly with responsibility).
- Support instructors and students who may have different availability to come up with **reasonable times** for everyone to meet.

## KEY LEARNER CHALLENGE: LANGUAGE

Language barriers can present unique difficulties in capturing and incorporating learner voices. Low levels of English literacy, for both native English and ESL speakers, can render engagement modalities like written surveys ineffectual or incomplete in representation.

**Barriers of language should be evaluated at the program level and engagement modalities adjusted accordingly, with accommodations provided where possible.** Erin Keafer, Assistant Director of English Programs, ESL to Go at the Tennessee Language Center (TLC) provided the following resources to address learners' language challenges:



- [TLC](#) offers interpretation & translation in many languages along with telephonic interpretation services.
- [Nashville ESL Classes \(Pathways for New Americans\)](#) is a list of English classes in the Nashville area offering both free and fee-for-service English classes (compiled by the Nashville Public Library).
- [Talking Points](#) is an app used to communicate with students or families. Teachers create class rosters of students and can then communicate with them through automatic translation—much easier than individually translating text messages.
- [Google Translate](#) application is a helpful resource for communicating basics, but should not be relied on for sensitive/medical/legal translations since translations are often imperfect.
- Connect with places of worship—e.g. churches that have Spanish language services or mosques—offer announcements and flyers about literacy classes in potential learners' native languages. This is currently done at [St. Ann Catholic Church](#).
- [Transparent Language](#) is available free through the Nashville Public Library's website. This site is available in many native languages and offers practice in listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills.
- [News in Slow English](#) improves listening comprehension and vocabulary by listening to news articles at a slower speed.
- [Literacy Minnesota](#) offers free resources for teaching literacy.
- [NewsELA](#) offers texts and content at different levels including authentic news articles.
- [Nashville Adult Literacy Resources](#) is a helpful list compiled by NALC about online resources for literacy learners.
- [NY Public Library Free Websites to Practice English at Home](#)
- [BBC Learning English](#) features numerous exercises for grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and news (note: reflects British English spellings and accents).
- [ESL/ELL Interactive Websites for Learning](#) is a resource compiled by the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

## KEY LEARNER CHALLENGE: TRANSPORTATION

**Reliable and convenient transportation is a challenge** for many learners. Some are not able to drive, while others lack vehicles, and public transportation can be time-consuming or limited.

*To address transportation issues, GOAL partners provided these suggestions:*

- **Virtual meetings**, where appropriate. Virtual meetings sidestep the need for transportation, but they require reliable internet, and a sense of community can be more difficult to foster in this environment.
- **Coordinate multiple agency activities** or events into one trip for the learner.
- Host public events in **locations accessible to public transit** and provide instructions for use.
- Offer **transportation subsidies** for incentivized programs, like advisory councils or focus groups (even car services for smaller groups or individuals who do not have accessible public transit nearby).
- Schedule **activities when learners are able to secure rides** (e.g. when family members are off work).
- **Advocate** for public programs like the District of Columbia's [Adult Learner Transit Subsidy Program](#).
- TCAT Dickson (TAEM) offers a [Live Work program](#), where learners make an appointment with the automotive program at a Tennessee College of Applied Technology and only pay a \$5.00 Live Work service fee. In some instances, the service fee is waived if, for instance, the participant is part of a grant providing assistance for the service, and/or if there is funding within the grant to additionally pay for parts. At the appointed time, the vehicle will be assessed and under the supervision of the instructor, a detailed parts list created. Once the owner of the vehicle has procured the parts, they may then schedule to come in to have the repairs done by students under the supervision of the instructor. Potential participants should check with the TCAT where they would like to receive assistance and determine their specific requirements.
- Tennessee College Access & Success Network's '[Point of Departure](#)' report highlights the challenges and opportunities for improving transit to better serve adult learners.

## OTHER CHALLENGES TO LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Additional challenges that will require future research to address include:

- **Selecting modes of feedback:**
  - Surveys have varying levels of response and don't capture the perspectives of all learners.
    - Best format of surveys is unclear—options include WhatsApp, email, and other platforms.
  - Face-to-face contact with students may be brief, even if in person.
  - Phone call inquiries often have limited success.
- **Continuing communications:**
  - Career services students may stay in touch as they continue their careers, but "graduated" students frequently move along to find a job or pursue other education.
  - Student contact information changes and is not always communicated to agencies.
- **Ensuring that students understand the importance of the feedback** and creating an environment where they don't feel reluctant to speak up early and often.
- **Getting a spectrum in feedback**—people with strong opinions tend to share feedback most readily.
- Communicating with **clarity on what can be changed** by the agency and what can't.
- **Remote teaching**—reduces informal in-person feedback (overhearing as people walk by, ability to ask a question at the end of class, a quick chat as passed in the hallway, or fly-on-the-wall insights).

Overall, finding the right method(s) to obtain mass feedback on programs, and continuing to do so despite barriers and the passage of time were challenges shared universally.

## FOCUSED APPROACH: ADVISORY COUNCILS

Advisory councils can be a **crucial tool in amplifying the voices and increasing the decision-making role** of service populations. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's [Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations](#) offered a valuable list of questions to consider if developing an advisory council. These were used to research the advisory councils at GOAL Collective partner agencies.

Several partners have advisory councils that are focused agency-wide, rather than specifically on adult education programs. Not only do these councils encourage **collaboration** of participants with the agency decision makers, but they also foster **goodwill** in their communities. Several councils include representatives of agencies' community partners.

A systemic challenge with advisory councils is the organizational **capacity** to fulfill their recommendations and an understanding of the **limitations** of the organization to meet members' needs (most commonly in terms of finances). One partner's approach is to immediately fulfill recommendations that don't cost money (e.g. removing bushes blocking drivers' sight lines on campus).

The biggest functional challenge to all advisory councils is **consistent participation** by members. Finding a time that is convenient for everyone and overcoming barriers like transportation and childcare are crucial. Consistent staffing was also cited as an issue; if the agency staff member with ownership of the council changed, the advisory council's cadence and plans could be negatively impacted.



More than one advisory council meets contiguously with other agency activities or around a community mealtime when participants are more likely to be present and have motivation to prioritize the engagement to fulfill multiple purposes or needs. This best practice aligns with the broader time/capacity and transportation solution of **stacking in-person events for maximum attendance**.

Most of the advisory councils we researched did not offer **incentives** other than refreshments or meals or sometimes transportation assistance. One partner repeatedly indicated that in the future, they would like to offer compensation to create equity with the paid staff fulfilling similar purposes in the meetings. Another partner offers a small payment for monthly meetings and asynchronous assignments, but expressed concern that the council was viewed by members as a job to perform when money was needed.

Most advisory councils **meet monthly**, with one city-wide partner council that includes representatives of numerous partner agencies meeting quarterly.

Agency staff typically lead the meetings and set the agendas, and they generally provide programming updates with time for open discussion with members. Several partners expressed a desire for members of their service populations to have a **greater leadership role** in setting the agendas and guiding activities.

Advisory council members are typically **recruited individually** from engaged program participants. Most agencies expressed a desire to improve their orientation processes and formalize their expectations, with the majority lacking these onboarding elements.

All but one agency expressed that their councils were **successful in engaging their participants** or were hopeful that with adjustments, they would meet their goals. Additional resources to explore advisory councils can be found at the Working Group's [Learner Advisory Council Research](#).

## OTHER SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVED LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

### Strategic Prioritization of Learner Voice

Many of the reported “Organizational Challenges” relate to **organizational culture and strategic and staff priorities**. If addressed and prioritized by agency leaders and planned into program design and development, some of these challenges could be ameliorated. Organizations could consider the following steps:

- **Prioritize** learner feedback as a part of operations and allocate documentation time in staff schedules.
- Commit to defining where decision making can be impacted by learners so that their voices are valued in the direction of programs and operations. Make a policy to not request feedback where the agency is unwilling to **cede power** or **make adjustments** based on learners’ input.
- Add a feedback field to client **record keeping** systems and encourage staff to use it routinely.
- **Store results** of evaluation modalities and notes from meetings **centrally** to outlive staffing changes.
- Establish and support a **tracking system** to keep in touch with students after program completion.
- Provide opportunities for **learner-driven discussion**, where learners take the lead in discussions within the group that empower them to develop and give feedback.
- Give learners a voice in the services that are provided (**two-way conversation**).
- Train on **motivational interviewing**—coaching the interviewer to help decipher the learner’s voice.
- Invite learners to assist with **strategic planning**.
- **Manage expectations** by avoiding overpromising and under-delivering in client engagement.
- Provide training on [Appreciative Advising and Appreciative Education](#) from Dr. Jennifer Bloom.
- Encourage **intentionality** in collecting learner stories, and **respect** learner and staff conversations.
- Assess learner enrollment, advisement, and exit procedures to **identify opportunities for input**.

### Incentives

Organizations offer various incentives to encourage increased learner engagement and feedback.

- Weigh **voluntary versus incentivised feedback** and ability to incentivise, financially or ethically.
- **Budget** for deeper incentives to provide feedback, including financial (often in the form of gift cards).
- Offer **non-financial incentives** to participate (financial incentives alone might result in learners simply attending, without contributing).
- Provide **engagement activities** onsite for students and families, and design activities to promote interaction and fun, increasing social connections.
- **Stagger delivery**—not providing an incentive at every engagement or meeting, but staggering over the course of the year or term so that learners aren’t just participating for the incentive.
- Stress **professional benefits** of participating in advisory boards or committees, like networking, making connections, and résumé building.
- Make the **end goal** of the engagement more tangible for learners.

### Mentorship

- Build a **network of learners who have graduated** who would be interested in serving as mentors.
- Invite previous students or immigrants who have overcome challenges/obstacles to achieve their goals to speak to current students to help them see that someone like them has **experienced success**.
- Have a current student talk about how they got a **job or promotion** after improving their English or other skills in an ESL, HiSET or other course of study.
- Consider **mentorship programs** at local agencies:
  - For refugee learners, Catholic Charities and NICE offer family mentor/volunteer programs for both children and adults.
  - Legacy Mission Village offers a Kindergarten Readiness Program along with the Journey program for high school aged refugees to provide academic, social and cultural support.

## Building Trust

- Design interactions and classrooms to **encourage building of trust**, relationships, and connections.
- Create opportunities for **extra-classroom social connection** with instructors and peers.
- **Improve intake processes**—spend enough time with new students to ensure they feel valued and included and that their needs are known and addressed with help on food banks, healthcare, etc.
- **Encourage deepened connections** among staff and volunteers within an agency (and beyond); have group meetings that could include agency goals, progress updates so everyone is in the loop, training, socializing, or celebrating.
- **Employ Peace-Making Circles** (a space where everyone’s voice is important). These can be used around mealtimes, or use circle “principles” without employing the official peace-making circle process.

## Building Confidence

- For “shy” learners in class, teach **“taking turns”** and call on learners so each gets a chance to participate. Do a lot of **“think/pair/share”** activities.
- Use **breakout rooms** in Zoom to limit group size, which encourages more individual talking.
- Use exercises that incorporate **written** answers/activities rather than only requiring people to speak.
- Include **small group** social chit chat or **pairing** at the beginning of each class, with suggested conversation prompts.

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***Structural challenges can hinder learner feedback, especially when learners and their families are in crisis. Organizations should prepare or obtain lists of resources to share with learners in need.***

## Healthcare

- Provide a list of **free and low cost clinics**.
- The Medical Foundation of Nashville recommends [My Healthcare Home](#), where students can **search for affordable healthcare** based on their zip code.
- If a student needs a specialist and would benefit from [Project Access](#) services (a program of the Medical Foundation of Nashville), they should start with a primary care doctor who can refer them.
- For non-English speakers, Metro Public Health Department’s [website](#) includes a **translation tool** available in 80 world languages.

## Childcare

- **Provide childcare** for learners while in class. Begin Anew offers childcare with programming and homework assistance. Classes take place in churches that have appropriate classrooms available.
- **Provide online classes**, including classes that allow a parent to have children in the room where they are learning online (they can mute themselves during class when not speaking).
- **Provide a parent and child class**, teaching the parents to read to their children, sign up for Imagination Library books, get a library card, etc.
- **Connect** learners to other agencies that have resources to help (e.g. help learners connect with Martha O’Bryan Center for child care resources).

## Food Insecurity

- Provide information about **local food pantries**. Use Second Harvest’s online tool [“Find a Food Bank Near Me”](#) to find locations for food based on zip code.
- [The Branch of Nashville](#) is currently offering **comprehensive care**, meeting initial food needs, but digging deeper to offer more.

## SUMMARY

GOAL Collective partner agencies were united in their desire to provide programs that **meet the needs of students** to the best of their abilities, while **removing barriers to participation**. **One-on-one communication** and feedback were welcome across the board as learners were treated as individuals in their educational journeys. Most programs implemented **surveys** at various points in participation. Many programs created formal mechanisms for **group feedback**, including advisory councils and community meetings. However, few agencies had participants represented on their leadership or strategic planning teams.

Agencies unanimously expressed **challenges in both learner and staff capacity** to gather and implement learner voice in programs. Each organization should consider the unique opportunities and challenges experienced by their learners when designing learner engagement mechanisms. Organizational leaders should create systems that **prioritize learner engagement**, including planning for staff capacity, technical needs, and budget requirements that center learner collaboration in the design and implementation of programs.

*Thank you to the Learner Engagement Working Group Members and \*Co-Chairs who contributed to this project and the GOAL Collective partner agency members who provided information:*

- **Keith Barnes\***, The Family Collective of the United Way of Greater Nashville
- **Emily Behr**, Nashville International Center for Empowerment
- **Al Brady**, UpRise Nashville
- **Tasha Cartwright**, Martha O'Bryan Center
- **Mary Fitzgerald**, Nashville State Community College
- **Cade Fleming**, YWCA Nashville & Middle TN
- **Greg Gabis**, Catholic Charities of TN
- **Marnie Huff**, St. Ann Catholic Church ESL Program
- **Andrew Hunt**, Tennessee College Access & Success Network
- **Crystal Hunter**, TCAT Nashville
- **Jennifer Jones**, Safe Haven Family Shelter
- **Kim Karesh**, Nashville Adult Literacy Council
- **Erin Keafer\***, Tennessee Language Center
- **Vanessa Lazon**, MNPS Office of English Learners
- **Ameshica Linsey**, GOAL Collective
- **Bonnie Matthews**, GOAL Collective
- **Heather Norvell**, Begin Anew of Middle TN
- **Maryanne Rieder**, Monroe Harding
- **Lauren Rowe**, North Highland
- **Wendy Salyers**, The Branch of Nashville
- **Jamil Sameen**, Nashville Public Library
- **Lynn Seifert**, Workforce Essentials
- **Douglas Stewart**, TCAT Dickson
- **Cassandra Taylor**, Nashville Public Library
- **Ally Thomas**, Nashville International Center for Empowerment
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