

## Six colleges and universities launch a national alliance with students designing education's future

*Student-designed innovations will be rapidly tested and scaled to address access, engagement and equity gaps in higher education; Microsoft set to collaborate*

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**Zoom link for news conference May 13 at 4 p.m. EST** <https://gvsu-edu.zoom.us/j/93957803372?pwd=cG5OS3FabWZkOThaQUVDMCtXL0Zhdz09>

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — A national alliance of six colleges and universities, together with hundreds of high school and community partners, announced the launch of REP4, an initiative to change the future of education. Unique to the alliance, students will take the lead conducting “Rapid Education Prototyping” to address the urgent challenges of access and completion to fully deliver on higher education’s promise of social and economic mobility.

The six founding colleges and universities in the alliance collectively serve more than 100,000 students. Grand Valley State University is the organizer and convener of the REP4 alliance. The five other founding partners are: Amarillo College in Texas; Boise State University in Idaho; Fort Valley State University, an HBCU in Georgia; San José State University in California; and Shippensburg University, part of the state system in Pennsylvania.

The REP4 name underscores how student-led, Rapid Education Prototyping, will engage the voices of learners in designing innovative, actionable solutions *for* pressing challenges. Learners will co-design education prototypes, and the best ideas will be scaled nationwide through the alliance to maximize impact.

American Council on Education (ACE) President Ted Mitchell called the alliance’s approach unique and exciting. “Flipping the model from learners simply giving feedback to learners being designers of education is a truly innovative idea,” Mitchell said. “It’s unprecedented to engage learners directly in the designing experience, and REP4 can serve as a model for higher education nationwide.”

Microsoft will participate in the REP4 summit to support the alliance in reimagining student-centered experiences, consistent with its [recent whitepaper](#) on student-centered learning in higher education. Microsoft will help shape how technology, particularly data and AI, can empower personalized and inclusive learning experiences.

### **Tackling the crisis in education**

The REP4 alliance formed as a response to a growing number of challenges facing higher education: low completion rates, lack of access and racial gaps.

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, citing a 2016 Pell Institute study, the country has struggled to close a persistent gap related to income and degree attainment. From the study: among students in the bottom socioeconomic quartile, 15 percent had earned a bachelor's degree within eight years of their expected high school graduation, compared with 22 percent in the second quartile, 37 percent in the third quartile, and 60 percent in the top quartile.

COVID-19 has further exacerbated the crisis. A December 2020 McKinsey & Company study estimated that “students of color could be six to 12 months behind, compared with four to eight months for white students. While all students are suffering, those who came into the pandemic with the fewest academic opportunities are on track to exit with the greatest learning loss.”

By employing this innovative approach of allowing learners to design solutions, REP4 will focus on improving outcomes and eliminating these barriers.

“Our university’s mission has long included making education relevant, impactful and accessible for students,” said Fort Valley State University President Paul Jones. “Collaborating with other like-minded institutions across the nation will provide a tremendous opportunity to shift the paradigm of how we approach learning, particularly for underrepresented communities.”

Grand Valley State University designed and held the first prototype last summer. “We are inspired by young learners with keen perspectives on what their future can be,” said Grand Valley State President Philomena V. Mantella. “These learners gave us ideas that will play a key role as we lead the national conversation on a new vision for education. Their insights will help us create a model for an education system designed for learners by learners.”

Jaime Casap, former chief education evangelist at Google, echoed the enthusiasm for REP4 and said powerful change will come from leaders and learners harnessing their efforts for transformation. “I am passionate about this bold and extraordinary effort to increase quality in education by focusing on equity as the driving force for change,” Casap said. “This effort is defining an approach to transformative change using openness, transparency and collaboration. The power for lasting impact for millions of diverse students comes from working together. I couldn’t be more excited to roll up my sleeves and dive into the work.”

Boise State University President Marlene Tromp: “Students have powerful insights about how to improve their experience and innovate around education. Learning from them will help us, and all of higher education, imagine new ways of moving forward together.”

Mary A. Papazian, president of San José State University, said REP4 aligns well with the university’s mission. “Educating a diverse student population for professional success and civic engagement is part of our core mission,” Papazian said. “Students need to feel ownership of

their own learning, but often traditional practices and requirements stifle their participation. We believe REP4 will empower students to create a climate in which all students feel a sense of belonging.”

Shippensburg University President Laurie A. Carter: “REP4 is an important national network of like-minded institutions dedicated to social justice and social mobility. Shippensburg University is proud to represent the Northeast with this vital link to reimagining the future of higher education with impactful partners creating scalable programs.”

Amarillo College President Russell Lowery-Hart: “Higher education is at risk of irrelevance if we cannot adapt and innovate for a shifting landscape in technology and workforce development. REP4 links transformative institutions committed to reimagining learning. Amarillo College is honored to join this work with the goal of creating 21st century skills students can take with them on new and better transfer pathways.”

### **First prototype**

Grand Valley’s six-week Learner Engagement Challenge held last summer brought together 25 area high school students, along with GVSU students, to reimagine the future of learning to meet the changing needs of the 21st century.

One of the learners shared how powerful the Learner Engagement Challenge experience was. “I didn’t think I would make it as far as high school,” said Dionne Pinto-Guerra. “College feels like a goal that everyone has, but not everyone can reach. It was amazing to participate in a program where you get to change lives and change the system for the better.”

GVSU already implemented two ideas from the Learner Engagement Challenge. See more [here](#).

Each of the founding six partners will hold its own regional summit for REP4, with Grand Valley State University hosting the national convening August 5, 2021. The alliance is intended to grow over time and other institutions are invited to become involved with REP4. See [www.rep4.org](http://www.rep4.org) for more information.