How WGU’s Teachers College Built Community into their Character Education Leadership Program

WGU Labs (Labs) collaborated with WGU’s Teachers College to develop an online community as part of WGU’s new Character Education Professional Learning program (CEPL). Funded by a grant from the Kern Family Foundation, the program provides professional education and certification for K-12 principals implementing Character Education at their schools.

Because the online community was a key part of the learning experience, Teachers College wanted to utilize a user-centered approach to create the community aspect of their program. They came to Labs for help in optimizing the platform and content for a successful community launch. The partnership between Teachers College and Labs illustrates the value an experienced design team can bring to a client’s process and outcomes.

Why is community so important in learning?

When envisioning CEPL, Teachers College understood community is as equally important as professional certification and live online events. They’d done their research: professional learning communities offer continuous support, connection, identity and belonging that deepen learning experiences, support retention, and impact success. But these benefits only come when an online community is designed with intention and vision and woven throughout the core learning experience. CEPL needed a process to engage users to create a successful online learning community for K-12 principals.

Character education is a comprehensive school-based approach that prioritizes the teaching and modeling of character through the curriculum, school activities, and engagement with family and community, to promote individual and collective flourishing.
DESIGNING WITH THE USERS

Teachers College asked: How can we design a community that encourages engagement, interaction, and responsiveness? Applying a user-centered design process, Labs Learning Experience designers invited principals to provide input on the community’s user interface, structure/flow, and content. This process defined a solid structure for community members to interact naturally without obstacles.

FINDING RELEVANT PATTERNS IN USER DATA

Labs designers used the goals Teachers College originally set for the community as a guide when analyzing principals’ responses. Designers found relevant patterns and clues across the data, revealing potential design opportunities that could balance principals’ needs with the vision Teachers College had for the community.

INSIGHT: Principals need a safe space shared with fellow principals. The CEPL online community needs to be a central place for K-12 principals to share ideas, celebrate each other’s wins and find support with character education programs. Originally, Teachers College believed both principals and teachers interacting within the platform would foster deeper discussion, but user interviews surfaced principals’ hopes for limiting membership to principals only, so they could share and find support for even difficult challenges without holding back.

INSIGHT: Principals have little time to search and find resources or research new ideas. Though this insight confirmed what most already know – that K-12 principals have little unscheduled time for extra activities – it highlighted the importance of a quick-and-simple community experience: a central hub, multiple entry points, broad topics for fast searching, a centralized location for community information.

PROVIDING DATA-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers College and Labs collaborated on the community’s design and development. Labs designers offered recommendations on a community platform to use and ways to structure it based on their conversations with principals. Then, both teams discussed how those recommendations would impact participants’ interactions. These conversations provided Teachers College with the information and data they needed to make informed decisions on how the community would run.

TESTIMONIALS

“The Labs team is highly skilled and creative. Each team member brought their unique talents and proficiency to our work together. Since this was a newly forming program, it was important to us that the Labs team was flexible and adaptive to our needs. In addition to the professional services offered, I truly enjoyed the congenial personalities and kindness of each Labs team member I worked with.”

—Amelia Azul Elgas, Center for Professional Learning, WGU Teachers College

“Our partnership with WGU Labs was foundational in setting our CEBS project and CEPL program up for success. The service and support we received was of utmost quality. The Labs team quickly developed a clear understanding of our CEPL program and remained highly engaged, communicative, and responsive to feedback throughout the entire 3-month partnership. Labs provided innovative products and solutions that led to the successful launch and ongoing implementation of our nationwide professional learning program.”

—Christina Dehler, Director, Center for Professional Learning, TC
SETTING UP THE COMMUNITY

Teachers College and Labs content writers collaborated to create example posts for principals, modeling a process for productive, dynamic discussions.

Labs designers set-up the community, figuring out which content should be placed under specific topics or classified as question or resource posts.

In addition to the online community, the Labs team synced with CEPL’s program visual content guide to create visually appealing designs. This included a logo, program infographics, and event templates.

INITIAL SUCCESS

CEPL’s pilot program rolled out in July 2021 with their first live online event—the Summer Institute—where they unveiled the online community.

- Principals who participated in user interviews learned about the program and expressed interest in signing up.
- Teachers College utilized insights from user research to inform the Summer Institute.
  - For example, they included a specific session on the intersection between Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and character education, which principals expressed confusion about during interviews.
- After Labs initial help with setup, Teachers College took full control of the community; they are running the community self-sufficiently.
- Teachers College will continue to monitor and adapt the community as participants interact and membership grows.

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