

# 2026 AECT Design & Development Competition

## Problem Statement

### Building Bridges Through an AI-Augmented Professional Learning Ecosystem for Global Educators Network (GEN)

#### Background

The **Global EdTech Network (GEN)** is a fictitious international professional association whose members include instructional designers, researchers, faculty, educational technologists, and other professionals committed to improving learning with technology. GEN members work in varied settings, including higher education, K–12, healthcare, industry, government, and nonprofit contexts.

As GEN continues into its second century, As GEN enters its second century, it aims to "Build Bridges" by connecting fragmented membership groups (students, researchers, educators, practitioners, and retirees) who currently struggle to navigate professional pathways. Although GEN offers rich opportunities for conferences, publishing, professional service, and networking, members may experience these opportunities in fragmented ways. New members may be uncertain where to begin; graduate students may struggle to navigate professional pathways; and experienced members may not always find efficient ways to mentor, collaborate, and share expertise across contexts. In that spirit, GEN seeks ideas for an **AI-augmented professional learning ecosystem** that helps connect members to one another, to GEN resources, and to meaningful opportunities for learning and contribution.

#### About GEN

Headquartered in Chicago, IL, GEN serves 5,000 members globally. Existing technology includes a basic member portal, a legacy listserv, and an off-the-shelf content management system (CMS). GEN also supports a growing publishing ecosystem and organizational infrastructure designed to expand member engagement and professional impact.

GEN invites several design firms, including yours, to propose a design for an AI-augmented professional learning ecosystem for its members.

#### Needs

The proposed design should demonstrate the potential of:

- Building bridges among GEN members across career stages, interests, divisions, and contexts of practice.
- Supporting adult learning and professional performance improvement through a personalized and scalable system.
- Using generative AI responsibly to help members discover resources, learning opportunities, collaborators, and professional pathways.
- Connecting formal and informal learning opportunities, including conference participation, publishing, mentoring, service, and self-directed development.

- Providing an evaluation plan that GEN can use to appraise the effectiveness of the ecosystem after implementation.

### **Required Components**

Your proposed solution design must:

1. Clearly define what is meant by a **professional learning ecosystem** in the context of GEN.
2. Explain how the proposed system supports the “**Building Bridges**”.
3. Use generative AI responsibly and describe how AI functions support member learning, engagement, and performance improvement as well as ethical considerations of integrating AI and data privacy for participants.
4. Address the needs of multiple GEN member groups, such as graduate students, new professionals, experienced members, leaders, and cross-division (special interest groups) collaborators.
5. Include both instructional and non-instructional components, such as learning pathways, mentoring structures, social learning opportunities, and knowledge-sharing supports.
6. Provide an adoption plan that helps GEN introduce the ecosystem to members and encourage sustained use over time.
7. Provide a suggested evaluation plan for GEN to use in assessing the effectiveness of the ecosystem.

### **Proposal Elements**

Your Phase I abstract and Phase II proposal must describe a design solution that meets the following criteria:

- A. Covers the required components listed above.
- B. Connects proven academic methodologies to real-world professional learning and performance improvement practice.
- C. Includes a realistic approach for supporting adult learners in varied professional contexts.
- D. Includes an evaluation plan so GEN can assess the effectiveness of the proposed ecosystem.

The Phase II proposal should also:

- Include a suggested schedule for design and development of the ecosystem (assume the start date is **December 1, 2026**).
- Include a suggested budget plan that realistically and practically covers the design of the ecosystem by your team.

### **Competition Overview**

Find and review all competition information, guidelines, due dates, Q&A forms, and submission links as they are made available here:

<https://aect.connectedcommunity.org/aectnatoactdesigndevelopmentcompetition/aect-dd-competition/home>

Teams of two graduate students are invited to participate in the design competition. Graduate students do not need to be from the same university; however, all participants must be members of AECT by the final phase of the competition. Both members must be enrolled as a graduate student as of January of the competition year. Submissions are evaluated in three phases as described below. Refer to the “Competition Guidelines” at the location identified above for the detailed requirements for each phase. Phase 1 of the Competition The first round of the competition involves the creation of a proposal abstract. The abstract must specifically address the five required proposal elements. It must be detailed enough to give a sense of what you intend to do, but it should not be the final product in full detail.

### **Phase I of the Competition**

The first round of the competition involves the creation of a proposal abstract. The abstract must specifically address the required proposal elements. It must be detailed enough to give a sense of what you intend to do, but it should not be the final product in full detail.

- It must be submitted by the posted due date for complete consideration.
- A Q&A form will be provided to collect questions about the problem statement.
- Up to eight abstracts from Phase I will be selected to proceed to Phase II, for which a formal and complete proposal of your entire solution will be required.

Important: Failure to remove personal information, names, and institutional information may result in automatic disqualification from the competition. Do not use your institution's nickname or mascot as your team or product name. Refer to the “Competition Guidelines” for more information on protecting your team’s anonymity.

### **Phase II of the Competition**

If the Phase I reviewers determine that your abstract represents a viable solution, your team will move to Phase II and work with a mentor who will be assigned to help you develop your final proposal.

The Phase II proposal must specifically address the required components and include a schedule and a practical budget. You will create a detailed description of the design solution, provide justifications for what you are including, and explain how you will create and support it.

Proposals must be submitted by the stated due date. Up to three proposals from Phase II will be invited to make a presentation to the judging panel at the AECT Annual Convention.

### **Phase III of the Competition**

The presentation phase is meant to mimic the experience of pitching a design solution to a client. Up to three finalist teams will be asked to make a presentation to the judging panel at the 2026 AECT Annual Convention. Each team will have 30 minutes to present its solution (20 minutes for presentation and 10 minutes for questions). The judges will deliberate, and one team will be selected as the winning-contract presentation.