



FAQs & DEFINITIONS

UNPACKING SOME OF THE MYTHS AND TERMS IN STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Students at the Center synthesizes—and adapts for practice—current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to provide practitioners and policymakers with tools and information that can help them not just to set ambitious goals for student learning but, even more important, to make real improvements to teaching practices and the school and district policies that affect them. Together with our partners we aim to ensure all students—with a special focus on underserved youth and students of color—have concrete opportunities to acquire the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed for success in college, in the workforce, and in civic life.

An edited volume of the first series of *Students at the Center* research papers, *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers* (2013), is available from Harvard Education Press. Additional papers, a wealth of teaching tools, materials, newsletters, blogs, and other resources are freely available on the project website: www.studentsatthecenterhub.org

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- > **Isn't student-centered just a generic, overused term that means "good stuff for kids"?** It can be. It's a term that has been around for a long time and means many things to many people. However, *Students at the Center* has adopted a precise definition, grounded in solid empirical research into effective teaching and learning. We use the term to refer to four specific practices that show strong evidence of success in preparing students for college, careers, and civic life: 1) providing students with personalized high-quality instruction; 2) enabling students to advance to the next level, course, or grade based on demonstrations of their skills and content knowledge; 3) providing students with opportunities to learn outside of the school and the typical school day; and 4) encouraging and allowing students to take an active role in defining their own educational pathways.
- > **Competency education and student-centered learning are the same, right?** No. Student-centered learning is the broader concept, and competency education is one of its four principles. Practiced in isolation, competency education isn't necessarily student-centered, in that it might be implemented in a way that ignores students' individual needs, interests, and talents.
- > **What about personalization? Isn't that the same as student-centered?** Like competency education, personalization is an important part of what we mean by the broader concept of student-centered learning, but personalization alone isn't sufficient. It depends on what else is going on. For example, among specialists in digital education, it has been common to describe just about every kind of self-paced

learning program as “personalized,” so long as the given software can record individual students’ progress and zero in on any material that they haven’t yet mastered. But if such programs do nothing to help students identify and pursue their own interests, or if they force students to march through a prescribed curriculum, then we wouldn’t describe it as student-centered learning. Happily, though, the field of digital education now appears to be moving toward a definition of “personalization” that aligns with our own, emphasizing the relationships and student agency that research shows to be critical to students’ long-term success. Stay tuned.

- > **My school has one-to-one computing and uses adaptive software to diagnose students’ needs. Does that mean it’s student-centered?** Again, that depends. Does it attend to students’ own needs and interests? Does it allow them to have any say in determining how and what they learn? Does it foster learning in relationship with others? Can students access the technology when they’re not at school, and does it connect to real-world and hands-on applications? If you can answer yes to these questions, then one-to-one computing is being used in a student-centered way.
- > **Are the Common Core State Standards student-centered?** The Core—or any set of standards—is just a set of goals, describing a destination and some benchmarks along the way. One can teach to those standards, and assess students’ progress toward them, in ways that completely align with student-centered principles and strategies . . . or not.
- > **If an approach is student-centered, it must be good instruction, right?** Nope. It’s possible to be too student-centered, in the sense that one neglects to give students the direction, scaffolding, and guidance they need, or neglects to define meaningful goals for learning. That’s why we talk about “student-centered approaches

that lead to deeper learning.” I.e., student-centered approaches in the service of helping kids become truly well-educated.

- > **Does student-centered learning mean never lecturing in class again?** Not at all. Student-centered approaches are designed to ensure that students have rich, timely, and meaningful ways to deepen and stretch their learning. What matters is that they have ample opportunities, over time, to learn in these ways, not that every teacher must provide a certain kind of instruction on any given day. At times, teachers might decide that it would be best to share particular information by lecturing.
- > **Won’t competency-based high schools have such wacky transcripts that my kids will have a hard time getting into college?** Almost all four-year colleges will tell you they deal with thousands of nontraditional transcripts every year, including competency-based ones. In New England, 55 public universities and community colleges in 5 states endorsed competency-based high school diplomas, paving the way for a more seamless postsecondary transition. This is simply not proving to be the problem that many people feared it would be.
- > **I’ve heard a lot about how important it is to create a comprehensive system of supports for learning, but I don’t see it in your framework. Why not?** We agree that supporting a student’s social and emotional needs is critical to the learning process. However, we don’t see that as distinct from the rest of the student-centered approach. Rather, we believe that such supports should be embedded in all of the ways in which schools personalize learning, build student agency, assess and move students through the curriculum, and facilitate anytime, anywhere learning. Social and emotional support isn’t a distinct element of a student-centered system; rather, providing that support is critical to implementing each of those four principles successfully.

DEFINITIONS

Deeper learning: An umbrella term for the skills and knowledge that students must possess to succeed in 21st century jobs and civic life. At the heart of deeper learning is a set of competencies students must master in order to develop a keen understanding of academic content and apply their knowledge to problems in the classroom and on the job. The deeper learning framework includes six competencies that are essential to prepare students to achieve at high levels:

1. Master core academic content
2. Think critically and solve complex problems
3. Work collaboratively
4. Communicate effectively
5. Learn how to learn
6. Develop academic mindsets

Tools that can be used *in the service of student-centered approaches to learning:*

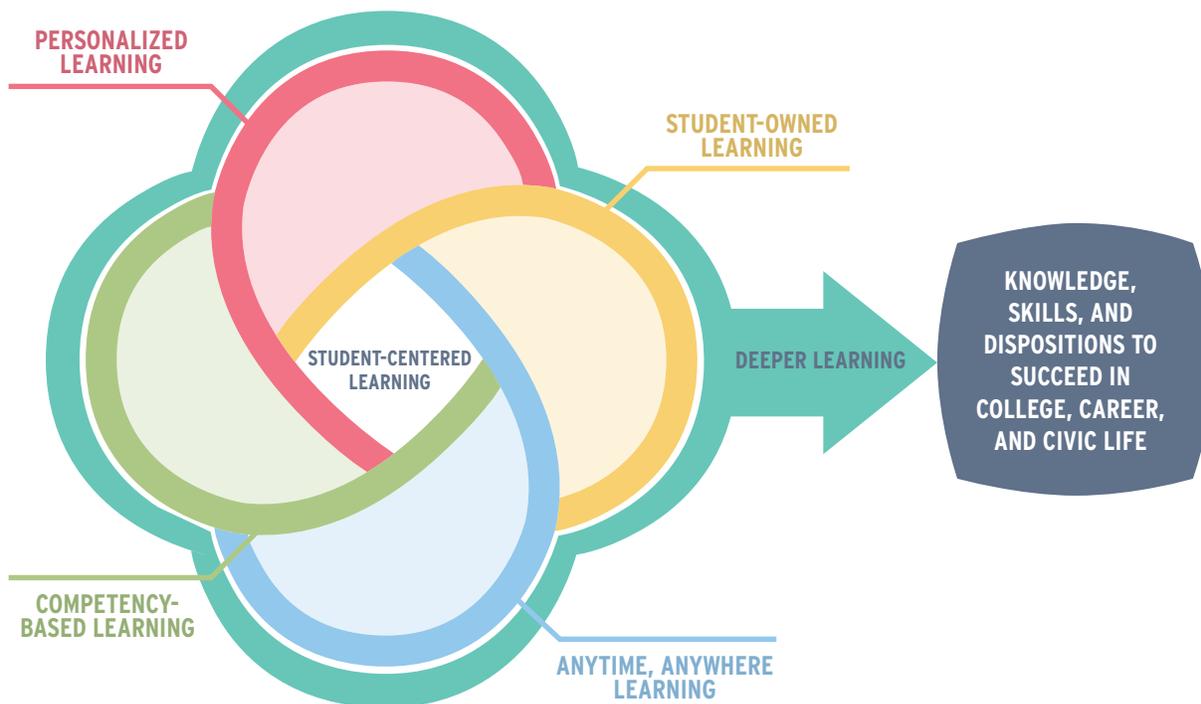
- Project-based learning
- Portfolios (process or capstone)
- Individualized (personal) learning plans
- STEM/STEAM/CTE courses & pathways
- Advisory/primary person/learning coach
- Exhibitions
- Internships
- Universal Design for Learning
- Adaptive software
- Dual enrollment (or early college)
- Performance-based assessment
- Blended learning

... and so on.

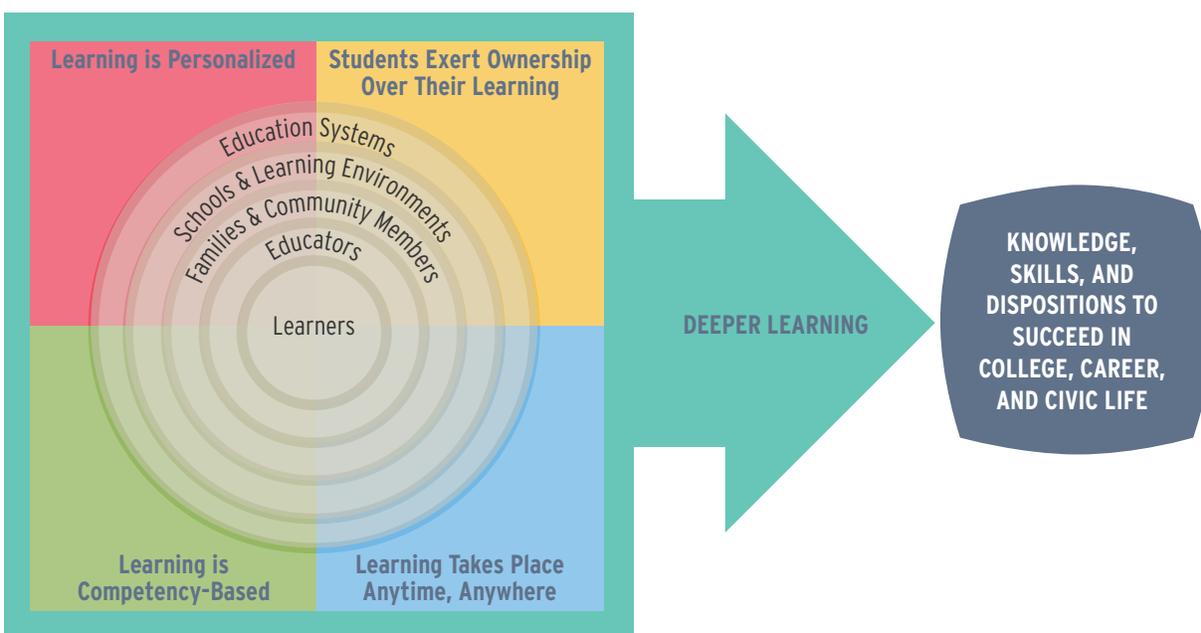
STUDENTS AT THE CENTER LEXICON	CLOSELY RELATED TERM(S)
Anytime, anywhere learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Blended learning > Expanded learning opportunities > Project-based learning
Competency education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Competency-based education > Mastery-based education > Proficiency-based education
Deeper learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 21st-century skills and knowledge > SCANS skills > Common Core Plus
Personalized learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Next-generation learning > Customized learning
Student-owned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Student voice and choice > Student agency

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER FRAMEWORK AND IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW

All students should have significant and meaningful learning experiences that draw on all four principles of student-centered learning. Preliminary research indicates that together these four strategies have an amplifying effect that will lead to the deeper learning outcomes necessary for college, career, and civic success.



In order to produce student-centered systems that work for all students, stakeholders at every layer of the education ecosystem have roles and responsibilities to implement, study, and continually improve across the four principles.





Students
at the
Center



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC SUCCESS

Students at the Center synthesizes—and adapts for practice—current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life.

An edited volume of Students at the Center's first series of research papers, *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers* (2013), is available from Harvard Education Press. The full collection of research syntheses, exploring areas of assessment, teaching, equity, competency education, district structures, and more can be found at www.jff.org/initiatives/students-center/topics. Further, a wealth of related teaching tools, materials, newsletters, blogs, and other curated resources are freely available on the Students at the Center Hub (studentsatthecenterhub.org), an online resource for educators, families, students and communities interested in learning more about student-centered approaches to learning.

RATIONALE & BACKGROUND

In an increasingly interconnected and fast-changing world, our educational system must provide all young people with the sorts of high-level learning opportunities that used to be reserved for a privileged few.

That premise has fueled more than three decades of efforts to improve the performance of the nation's schools. However, for all of the ways in which reformers have shaken up the world of K-12 education in recent years, the heart of the enterprise—teaching and learning—has changed very little in most schools and for most children. And as a result, the leading approaches to educational reform have largely failed to boost educational achievement across the U.S., or to close the achievement gaps that divide our students.

Students at the Center provides educators with tools, information, and support that can help them not just to set ambitious goals for student learning but, even more important, to make real improvements to teaching practices and the school and district policies that affect them, so that all students—with a special focus on underserved youth—have concrete opportunities to acquire the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed for success in college, in the workforce, and in civic life.

Jobs for the Future launched Students at the Center by commissioning teams of distinguished scholars to synthesize existing research on student motivation and engagement, cognitive development, school improvement, and efforts to take effective teaching practices to scale. Students at the Center has

since commissioned its second set of white papers, analyzing research and describing policy strategies that promise to support deeper learning in the nation's schools.

JFF disseminates such work widely by way of conferences, social and mainstream media, publications, professional development, and outreach to educational associations. Along with our school, policy, and industry partners, JFF also develops online tools, policy briefs, professional development, and other resources to help implement student-centered approaches.

Moving forward, Students at the Center will continue to expand the knowledge and evidence base for student-centered approaches that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Further, we will continue to adapt that research into formats that meet the needs of practitioners and policymakers, empowering them to solve critical and persistent problems in United States' education.

THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER FRAMEWORK

The Students at the Center framework defines a set of core, researched-backed principles for powerful teaching and learning, meant to ensure that all students develop the sorts of high-level knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to succeed in college, careers, and civic life.

These four key principles of student-centered learning—drawn from the mind/brain sciences, learning theory, and research on youth development—are overlapping and complementary. In combination, and when guided by a coherent and rigorous set

of educational goals, they provide a strong foundation for the pursuit of deeper learning:

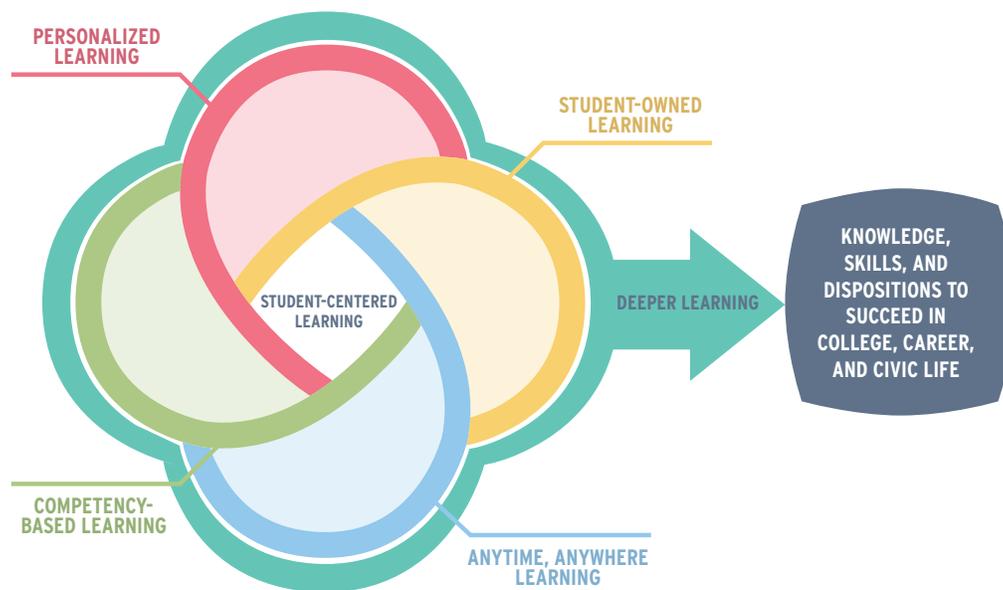
- 1. Learning Is Personalized:** Together educators, parents, and students customize learning experiences—what, how, when, and where they learn and the supports they need to learn—to students' individual developmental needs, skills, and interests. Although where, how, and when they learn might vary according to their needs, students also develop deep connections to each other and their teachers and other adults. Many applications of personalized learning emphasize the use of technology to enable the level of differentiation at scale.
- 2. Learning Is Competency-Based:** Students move ahead based not on their age or the numbers of hours they log in the classroom but, primarily, based on their ability to demonstrate that they have reached key milestones along the path to mastery of core competencies and bodies of knowledge. Further, each student must be provided with the scaffolding and differentiated support needed to keep progressing at a pace appropriate to reaching college, career, and civic outcomes, even when unequal resources are required to achieve a more equitable result.
- 3. Learning Takes Place Anytime, Anywhere:** Time is fully utilized to optimize and extend student learning and to allow for educators to engage in reflection and planning. Students

have equitable opportunities to learn outside of the typical school day and year in a variety of settings, take advantage of the variety of digital technologies that can enhance learning, and can receive credit for this learning based on their demonstration of skills and knowledge.

- 4. Students Have Agency and Ownership Over Their Learning:** Students understand how to get “smarter” by applying effort strategically to learning tasks in various domains and content areas. They have frequent opportunities to direct and to reflect and improve on their own learning progression toward college and career ready standards through formative assessments that help them understand their own strengths and learning challenges.

Deeper learning indicates two major types of outcomes as essential to college and career readiness for all:

- > The mastery of core academic content, including foundational domain knowledge, concepts, and modes of inquiry in the humanities, mathematics, sciences, and arts that form the building blocks for further study and skill specialization.
- > The academic ability and predilection to continue to learn and to apply and transfer knowledge effectively through higher-order skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and self-directed learning.



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Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. Across the country, we work to improve the pathways leading from high school to college to family-supporting careers. Our work aligns education and training to ensure that employers have access to a skilled workforce.

Students at the Center, a Jobs for the Future initiative, is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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