



## FAQs, Terms, and Student-Centered Learning

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**STUDENTS  
AT  
THE CENTER**  
A JOBS FOR THE FUTURE INITIATIVE

Students at the Center, a Jobs for the Future initiative, 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, the workforce, and civic life.

Edited volumes of two of the major Students at the Center research papers series, *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers* (2013) and *Rethinking Readiness: Deeper Learning for College, Work, and Life* (2017), are available from Harvard Education Press. Additional papers, a wealth of teaching tools, materials, newsletters, blogs, and other resources are freely available at [www.studentsatthecenterhub.org](http://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. For the most part, CE refers to delivery, assessment, and grading approaches that are supportive of an overall student-centered approach. Taken in isolation, competency education isn't necessarily student-centered, in that it can be implemented in a way that doesn't account for 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 more with our own, emphasizing the relationships and student agency that research shows to be critical to students' long-term success.

> **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. However, this curriculum and assessment tool is just one part of achieving an overall student-centered approach.

> **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, 69 public universities and community colleges in all 6 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.

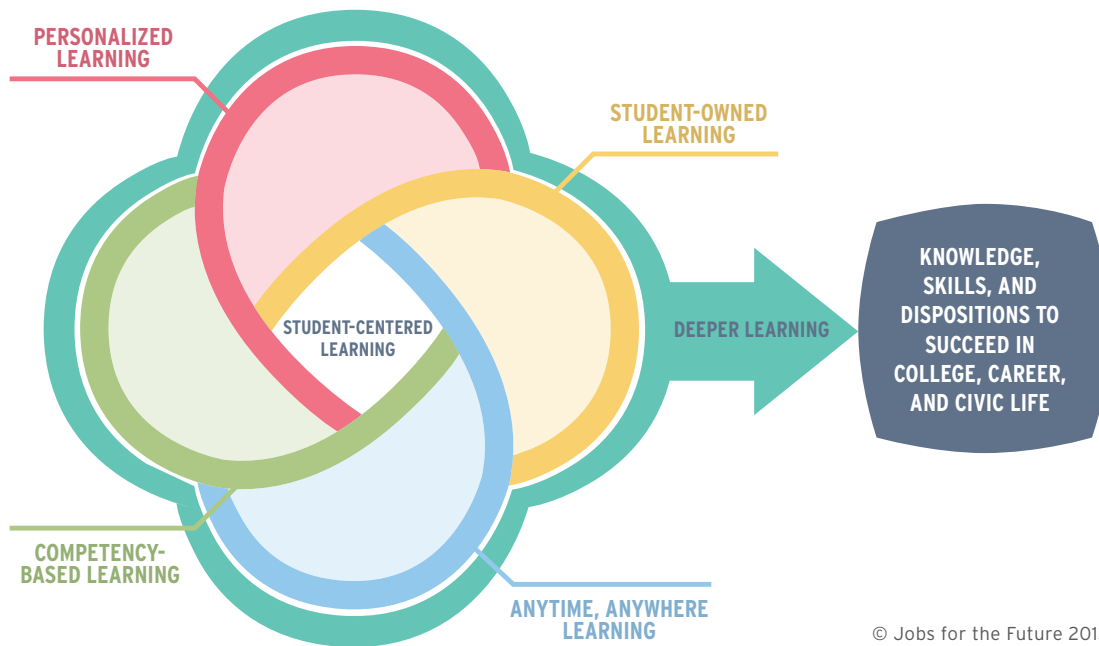
> **I've heard a lot about how important it is to create a comprehensive system of supports for learning, but I don't see it in your framework. Why not?**

We agree that supporting a student's social and emotional needs is critical to the learning process and many of the pieces in our research series point that out. However, we don't see that as a definitional element of a 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. In other words, social and emotional support is part of implementing each of the other four principles successfully.

> **Where do issues of equity fit into all this?** We're glad you asked! It's "baked in" to everything we do, from how we define the elements and outcomes of student-centered approaches, to prioritizing issues of race, learning differences, and equity into our research series, research studies, and blogs, to explicit skills and indicators in our Educator and (forthcoming) Leadership Competencies for Learner-Centered, Personalized settings. A focus on low-income and traditionally marginalized populations serves as the main lens with which we approach our direct work with schools, districts, states, and field building.

# STUDENTS AT THE CENTER FRAMEWORK

All students should have significant and meaningful learning experiences that draw on all four principles of student-centered learning. Research increasingly indicates that - when combined with rigorous content - these four strategies together have an amplifying effect that will lead to the deeper learning outcomes necessary for college, career, and civic success. For more information on the framework and to view related resources, visit [www.studentsatthecenterhub.org/interactive-framework](http://www.studentsatthecenterhub.org/interactive-framework).



**PERSONALIZED LEARNING** Working together, educators, parents, and students customize instruction as much as possible to students' individual developmental needs, skills, and interests. Students develop connections to each other, their teachers, and other adults that support their learning.

**COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING** Students move ahead in the curriculum based not on the number of hours they spend in the classroom but, primarily, on their ability to demonstrate that they have reached key milestones along the path to mastery of core competencies and bodies of knowledge.

**ANYTIME, ANYWHERE LEARNING** Students have equitable options to learn outside of the typical school schedule and away from the campus. Whether that means studying on line, completing an internship over the summer, or taking advantage of some other out-of-school opportunity, they can receive credit for the knowledge and skills they master.

**STUDENT-OWNED LEARNING** Students gain increased understanding of and responsibility for their own learning via frequent opportunities to decide such things as the topics they study, the books they read, the projects they pursue, and the curricular pathways they take en route to meeting college and career ready standards.

**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 rigorous academic content
2. Think critically and solve complex problems
3. Work collaboratively
4. Communicate effectively
5. Self-directed learning
6. Develop academic mindsets

# MOST COMMONLY ASSOCIATED INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES AND TOOLS

	CLOSELY RELATED TERMS	INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES AND TOOLS
<b>PERSONALIZED LEARNING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Next-generation learning</li> <li>▶ Customized learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Adaptive software</li> <li>▶ Advisory/primary person/learning coach</li> <li>▶ Blended learning</li> <li>▶ Exhibitions</li> <li>▶ Individualized (personal) learning plans</li> <li>▶ Portfolios (process or capstone)</li> <li>▶ Project-based learning</li> <li>▶ Universal Design for Learning</li> </ul>
<b>COMPETENCY EDUCATION LEARNING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Mastery-based education</li> <li>▶ Proficiency-based Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Exhibitions</li> <li>▶ Individualized (personal) learning plans</li> <li>▶ Performance-based assessment</li> <li>▶ Portfolios (process or capstone)</li> </ul>
<b>ANYTIME, ANYWHERE LEARNING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Open walled</li> <li>▶ Blended learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Project-based learning</li> <li>▶ Internships</li> <li>▶ Expanded Learning Opportunities</li> <li>▶ Dual enrollment (or early college)</li> <li>▶ STEM/STEAM/CTE courses &amp; pathways</li> </ul>
<b>STUDENT-OWNED LEARNING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Student agency and voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Exhibitions</li> <li>▶ Individualized (personal) learning plans</li> <li>▶ Portfolios (process or capstone)</li> <li>▶ Project-based learning</li> <li>▶ Student-led action research</li> </ul>
<b>DEEPER LEARNING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills and knowledge</li> <li>▶ SCANS skills</li> <li>▶ Employability skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Exhibitions</li> <li>▶ Portfolios (process or capstone)</li> <li>▶ Project-based learning</li> </ul>