



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*:

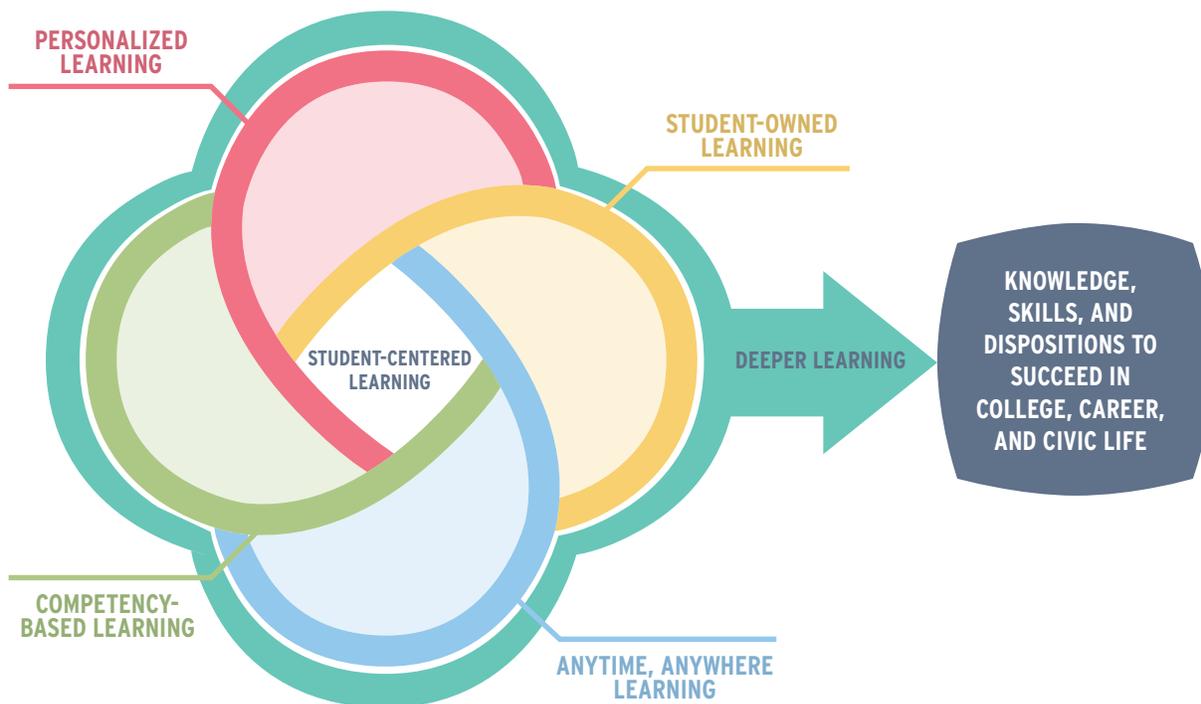
- Project-based learning
- Portfolios (process or capstone)
- Individualized (personal) learning plans
- STEM/STEAM/CTE courses & pathways
- Advisory/primary person/learning coach
- Exhibitions
- Internships
- Universal Design for Learning
- Adaptive software
- Dual enrollment (or early college)
- Performance-based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

