

# STUDENTS AT THE CENTER INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC SUCCESS



**Students at the Center**, a Jobs for the Future initiative, is a leading national voice for the knowledge, skills, and dispositions all youth need to succeed in college, career, and civic readiness. Our work 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—and especially low-income and marginalized youth—in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise they need to succeed in today’s and tomorrow’s economy and be lifelong learners.

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)

## 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 our 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 resource gaps that divide our communities.

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.

And in fall 2016, Students at the Center announced the Student-Centered Learning Research Collaborative. The Collaborative will catalyze researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to develop and share evidence on student-centered learning which will impact meaningful change at scale.

JFF widely disseminates the work of the Students at the Center initiative 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. Over the next three years, Students at the Center will increasingly use its framework, resources, and expertise to directly support states, districts, and community colleges implementing student-centered approaches that increase deeper learning outcomes for low-income and marginalized populations.

## THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER FRAMEWORK

The Students at the Center framework defines a core set of researched-backed principles that are known to drive powerful teaching and learning, and are designed 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:

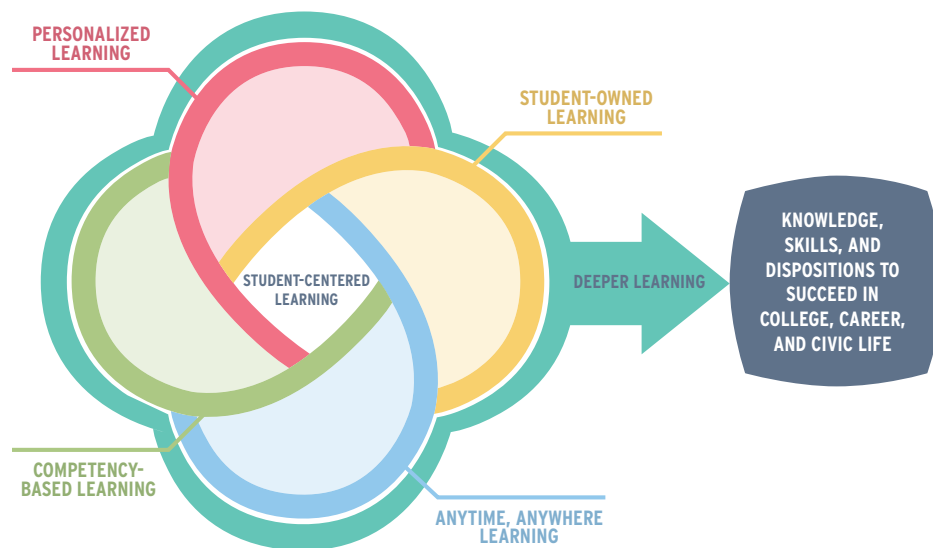
- 1. Learning Is Personalized:** Together educators, parents, and students customize learning experiences—what, how, when, and where they learn and the supports they need to learn—to students’ individual developmental needs, skills, and interests. Although where, how, and when they learn might vary according to their needs, students also develop deep connections to each other, their teachers and other adults, and their community. Many applications of personalized learning emphasize the role of student agency in personalizing learning (see principle #4) and 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 number 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 have frequent opportunities to direct, reflect, and improve on their own learning progression toward college and career readiness standards. Students are supported to take increasing responsibility for their own learning using strategies such as self-regulation, collaboration, self-assessment, help-seeking, self-advocacy, and creativity. Students have regular opportunities to determine topics of inquiry, to express perspectives, to guide how to best support and celebrate each other’s progress, to provide input into how their work is assessed, and to experience and design cultural responsiveness in both content and the learning environment.

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** is a national nonprofit that builds educational and economic opportunity for underserved populations in the United States. JFF develops innovative career and educational programs and public policies that increase college readiness and career success, and build a more highly skilled, competitive workforce. With over 30 years of experience, JFF is the national leader in bridging education and work to increase economic mobility and strengthen our economy.

**Students at the Center**, a Jobs for the Future initiative, receives core funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, along with additional support from other generous funders.



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