

Students at the Center

New England's future demands education based on a learner's needs and interests

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The past five decades have produced a tremendous archive of important and interesting strategies, frameworks and practices aimed at improvement in public education. Yet despite the vast set of knowledge generated by this work, gains have not been significant enough nor sustained. Young people still arrive at postsecondary institutions ill-prepared if they are lucky enough to arrive at all. At the same time, our region's economy and overall way of life are changing and will change more in the coming years. More and more, people find they need a degree or certificate that indicates a high level of skills and knowledge in order to achieve their goals and contribute to society. If we want to improve our region's prospects for the future and make good on the promise of education, we must find a way to increase the number of people who achieve this kind of postsecondary success. If we are to do that, we must begin to look at new ways to prepare young people for life during and after high school.

So what might it take to increase the number of well-rounded, educated young people who arrive at New England postsecondary institutions truly ready for success? One approach gaining momentum is "student-centered" or "personalized" learning.

Examples of student-centered learning have some important things in common. They allow for flexible use of time; acknowledge that learning can happen during "traditional" school hours, after school or during the summer, and in a variety of classroom or community settings; assess both a learner's mastery of content and skills using a combination of demonstration and traditional measures; and are customized to some degree based on a learner's needs and interests.

While these are not brand-new notions, these characteristics make it easy to see what differentiates these approaches to learning from our current K-12 system. The student-centered model takes into account the many ways and rates at which students learn and is focused on a broad set of essential and relevant skills. The current K-12 system instead focuses on a narrower set of skills, employing a familiar and convenient way to "batch process" those who will determine our collective future. This needs to stop.

The truth is that for many young people, learning experiences already take place in what are currently described as "nontraditional" settings. Research on summer learning reveals that young people learn invaluable lessons from camp, family and other experiences. Young people are often outside school when they tap their own desire to master some new skill.

The technological revolution has also had a profound impact that is, in part, personal by definition. The Internet as a research tool has, by itself, changed how people digest information. Young people now also engage in learning through online games and their related communities, and on social networking sites. Increasingly, they take their learning with them wherever they go, via 3G and 4G mobile networks. The changes in what young people need to know and how they engage will only continue to accelerate. The time has come for schooling to keep pace by taking some big, brave steps forward.

So what might a student-centered approach look like in practice? It might look something like the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) grant program in New Hampshire, where students receive credit for learning that takes place outside the classroom. While ELO students may

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receive partial credit for work at a magazine or newspaper, for example, this is not some internship where credits are awarded on the whim of instructors. In the ELO program, students need to demonstrate to the satisfaction of a qualified teacher that what they have learned ties back to pre-determined requirements. Those requirements are at the core of the competency-based assessments that are at the center of many student-centered approaches. The pre-determined requirements and standards must be attended to deliberately and thoughtfully. Otherwise, what should be an important part of a student-centered process could become meaningless to both learners and teachers.

The School of One is another example. School of One is a pilot summer school at M.S. 131 in New York City's Chinatown that uses technology to provide students with individualized and innovative math instruction. The month-long program focuses on key math concepts that students will need for seventh grade. School of One combines teacher-led instruction with independent learning and virtual tutors. Students move through the summer at their own pace and receive instruction that matches their own learning styles. Student progress is measured daily over the course of a summer, and it is not measured by seat time or what is taught. Rather, the School of One model utilizes what it has described as a "robust assessment engine that gathers and analyzes student performance each day so that subsequent instruction can be tailored to each student's academic needs."

In our current system young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are too often kept back to repeat grades because they fail to attain arbitrary, age-based benchmarks that define the dominant and rigid "one size fits all" design of most schools. In the School of One and other student-centered settings, education shifts from treating students who learn differently as problems to acknowledging those differences and attending to them as part of the educational endeavor. They ensure equal opportunity by customizing appropriately without sacrificing high expectations. Why then is this experience—one that can be a key component of postsecondary experiences—not promoted more at the secondary level?

There are those who suspect the cost of these approaches will be an obstacle. However, the costs—social and financial—of doing business as usual are unacceptable. The good news is that early analysis of comparative dollar-costs suggests these approaches are feasible. For example, Joel Rose of New York City's Department of Education estimated in *The New York Times* last summer that a school based on the School-of-One program would cost about the same as a traditional school.

New England's higher education community could reap the benefits of a student-centered approach at the high school level. First, it could help provide a more equitable playing field for postsecondary selection. If student needs are being attended to at the secondary level, we may see a decrease in dropouts among two groups that are traditionally not served well and leave high school in large numbers: students from low-income families and students of color (two of our region's fastest-growing populations).

Further, a student-centered approach may actually present students with the best chance to actually arrive on our region's campuses "college ready." In the bigger sea of college, students are treated academically as individuals with diverse interests and backgrounds and are required to manage both their time and their own need for instruction based on awareness of their skill level. David Conley of the Educational Policy Improvement Center describes these self-management skills as being a key to college readiness. If a student has been an active partner in managing his or her own high school education, he or she is much more likely to

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arrive on campus equipped with critical, applied skills and an ability to self-advocate. Why is an idea that is so conventional at the college level looked upon as "unconventional" or "alternative" if it happens in high school?

Some higher education institutions often react to student-centered learning experiences in high school as being too difficult to quantify when considering students for admission. However, there are already ways to accommodate student-centered approaches. Diploma Plus Inc., a national nonprofit that successfully focuses on re-engaging high-need students, often from underserved populations, uses an algorithm to equate its assessment process to grades to which colleges can refer.

If we are truly to make good on the promise of education, the time has come to firmly connect secondary and postsecondary experiences by putting students at the center of learning.

This will move us toward a system that is properly aligned with learner needs and the realities of our society—one that ensures students are truly prepared for postsecondary opportunities and, ultimately, for their role as the future of our region and our nation.

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