



# STUDENT EXPERIENCE

OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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From the first day of the school year, Summit students are asked to drive their own learning. Some will find this intuitive; others will need more supports to help them along the way.

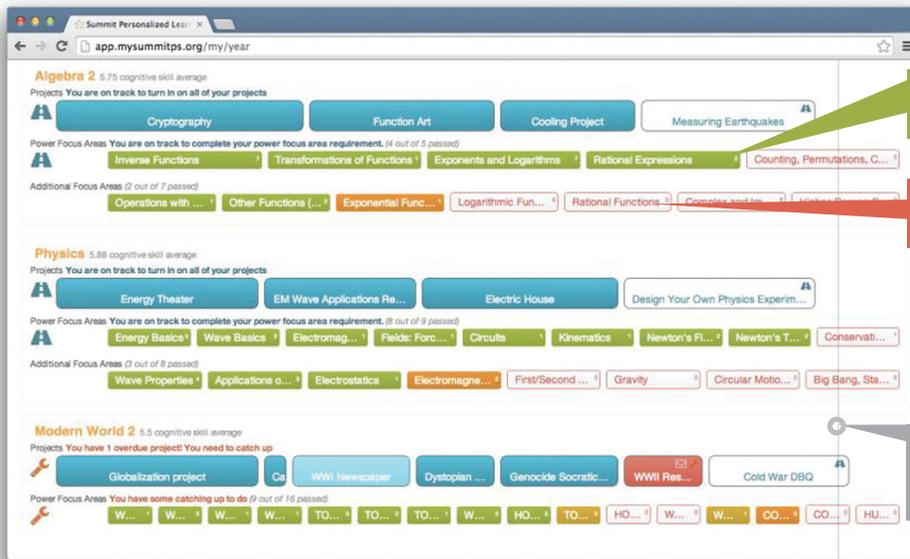
But for all students, the basic building blocks of self-directed learning – from setting a goal to making a plan to showing what you know to reflecting on where to go next – mirror the set of skills needed to learn autonomously in college and beyond. For students at Summit, developing these skills of self-direction occurs through a series of learning experiences that are markedly different from those at a traditional school.

### Personalized Learning Time

In a typical week at Summit, students experience two main types of learning: Personalized Learning Time and Project Time. Personalized Learning Time, or PLT, is all about content. For eight hours a week, students in PLT cluster across a large room, headphones on, and open up their laptops. Each student logs in to their Personalized Learning Plan (PLP). For each course they take, they see a sequence of colored boxes representing every content standard, or “focus area,” that they will need to learn for the entire year. When a student clicks on a focus area, they

are taken to a playlist that breaks down specific objectives and provides an array of exercises, videos, and progress checks tailored to the content area. Students spend as long as they need working through this content. When they feel ready, they click an on-demand “content assessment” at the end of each playlist. A teacher approves the assessment, and if the student gets an 8/10 they “pass,” that box turns green, and they move on to the next focus area.

The Personalized Learning Plan, with its series of green and red boxes, is like a roadmap for what to learn throughout the year, which students will have to navigate. Some prefer to work sequentially through focus areas while others move around. Students inevitably progress at different speeds – a few students even finish all the content for a given course and move on to the next one. And within each playlist, students learn differently as well. While many students find interactive practice problems the most engaging, some prefer to learn through videos, or others like detailed descriptive text. For Summit students, each of these learning choices they make



Green boxes mark focus areas that students have mastered

Red and white boxes indicate what they still have to do

A thin vertical line tells students if they are "on track" for a course.

– about which topics to tackle, what resources to pursue, and when to take assessments – builds an awareness of *how* to learn along with the *skills* to learn better in the future.

### Project Time

Personalized Learning Time, with its competency-based focus on content, is just one piece of self-directed learning. Students then spend twenty hours each week in Project Time, where teachers facilitate deeper learning activities designed to develop cognitive skills. Projects span a few weeks to a few months, with topics ranging from a joint English-Chemistry project on the merits of nuclear technology, to designing physics experiments, to creating mathematical models on the costs and benefits of college. Students use their online Personalized Learning Plans to track their progress through a given project, and to access a set of playlists with the underlying content knowledge needed

to complete that project successfully. At the end of a project, students must demonstrate what they've learned through written, oral, or multimedia performance tasks. Teachers coach students along the way, and assess each performance task using a cognitive skills rubric for skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, synthesis, and communication.

Effective projects give students an opportunity to apply the habits of self-directed learning to complex challenges and in heterogeneous group settings. By using Personalized Learning Time for content, and concentrating teacher time so intently on cognitive skills, Summit inverts the traditional, content-first approach to schooling. The continual reinforcement of cognitive skills also helps students be much more aware of their own strengths and challenges as learners – abilities that they will apply both to Personalized Learning Time and well after they graduate from Summit.

## Mentors & Noncognitive Skills

Beyond Personalized Learning Time and Project Time, Summit students experience several other modes of learning, including real-world “Expeditions,” “Community Time” with small groups of adults and peers, “Summit Reads” to hone literacy skills, and PE. But for self-directed learning, no time is more important than the 10 minutes that each student spends every week with their mentor. Mentors at Summit are teachers, trusted confidants, and coaches in the process of learning how to learn. Mentor conversations often start on a personal note, but center on student goal setting and reflection on their growth as self-directed learners. By doing so, mentor conversations at Summit encourage the noncognitive skills that students will need to thrive in college. Five skills in particular – challenge-seeking, persistence, strategy shifting, appropriate help-seeking, and response to setbacks – make up the “behaviors of self-directed learning”<sup>1</sup> that Summit seeks to instill in its students. In addition to mentor time, Summit holds teacher-led seminars for students on these five behaviors and teachers reinforce them regularly in their classrooms.

## The Challenge of Getting Started

On the first day of the 2013-14 school year, Summit students walked into a school that was different from any they had experienced before. Rather than going to lectures or waiting for teachers to tell them what to do, students were suddenly in charge of mastering a year of content, at their own pace, while developing a long list of cognitive and noncognitive skills.

<sup>1</sup> These behaviors draw on the work of David Yeager

# FIVE

## BEHAVIORS OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

- 1 : **Challenge Seeking**
- 2 : **Persistence**
- 3 : **Strategy Shifting**
- 4 : **Appropriate Help-Seeking**
- 5 : **Response to Setbacks**

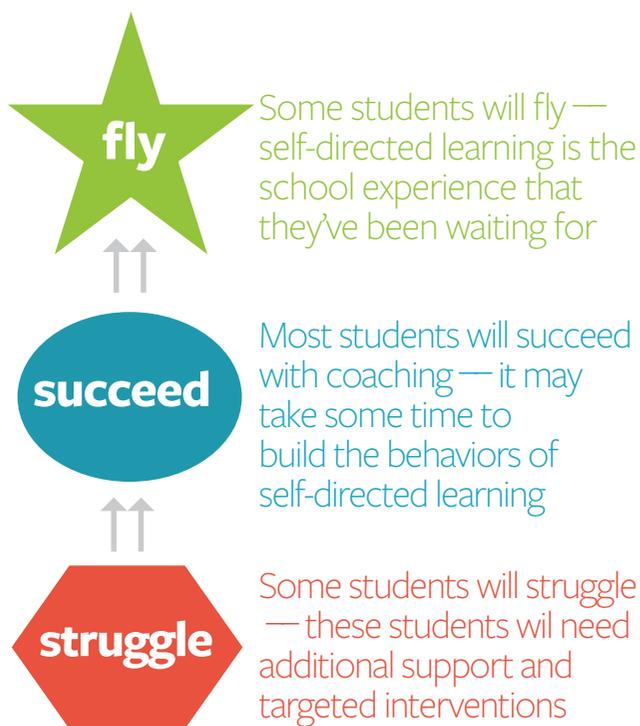
For some students, it was the school experience that they'd been waiting for. They flew through exercises and content knowledge, and a few went on to subsequent courses. Yet for other students, self-directed learning felt more than just new – it was diametrically opposed to everything they'd come to expect from school. While Summit had held orientations to self-directed learning and anticipated some of the challenges students would face, they underestimated the degree of model shock this group of students would experience.

## Moving Forward

Over the ensuing months Summit would chip away, bit by bit, at the pattern of behaviors students held from their past experiences of school. In their place, Summit familiarized students with the process of self-directed learning. Initially, students struggled with setting goals, often setting them too high or too low. After

intensive work with mentors and workshops on behaviors of self-directed learning, student goal-setting began to improve. Still, once goals were set, students struggled with knowing how to productively take the first step. In response, Summit focused on how to map backwards from goals and break steps into achievable chunks. This ability, too, gradually improved with time and practice. By the second semester, Summit students' pace of learning started to increase. More and more students were setting goals and passing content assessments, and with peer effects combined with adult reinforcement, self-directed learning began to gather steam.

By the time that 2013-14 drew to a close, students at Summit exhibited substantially different learning behaviors than they had at the beginning of the year. Many students had developed personal systems for working through playlists. Others would get genuinely excited about a passing grade and the knowledge that they'd mastered a piece of content. Teachers noted that more and more students, upon failing a content assessment, would step back and make a careful plan for how to get it right the next time. This was borne out in data as well. At the beginning of the year, students who failed content assessments would often take them over and over again in rapid succession, failing each time. But by the spring, Summit's data showed a decrease in the number of attempts to pass content assessments, and also a much longer interval of time between the taking and retaking, during which students would look at their playlists, speak to peers, seek help from teachers and mentors, and understand what they needed to improve. These shifts, in Summit's view, are signs that they've ended the year on the right note, and are on a good path for self-directed learning in the next school year.



## Middle School vs. High School

By and large, students in Summit's middle school have had an easier transition to self-directed learning than students in high school. The reason, Summit believes, is that 6th graders have fewer learned behaviors from their histories of school. High schoolers more readily set goals, but the younger students have more of a "growth mindset" and openness to a changing model.

## The Role of Technology in Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a long-held ideal in education. Models such as Montessori or Waldorf have even based their philosophies on enabling students to learn and explore for themselves. But these models have proven hard to replicate with typical public funding. Technology, when thoughtfully employed, provides a new set of tools for unlocking self-direction for a broader spectrum of schools. At Summit, technology aids everything from the delivery of content and assessments, to the analysis of student data, to the communication of student progress to teachers, parents, and students themselves.

Technology supports self-directed learning by:

- ✓ **Helping each student find the right resources at the right times to personalize their learning progression.**
- ✓ **Giving students agency to access content and assessments whenever they feel ready.**
- ✓ **Creating immediacy thanks to instant feedback on playlists and assessments.**
- ✓ **Promoting engagement among students who better understand their own learning.**
- ✓ **Providing accessible data on how each student is progressing to students, families, teachers, & administrators.**

Summit's current self-directed model would be impossible without technology. Yet faculty are quick to note its limits. Technology can quickly tell a student *what* they got right or wrong, but understanding *why* is a more complex process, grounded in inquiry and relationships with teachers and peers.