



**TEACHER**  
**EXPERIENCE**  
OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

In order for students to assume a more central role in their own education, adults in the building must create the space for them to do so.

For teachers, this means stepping back from their traditional role as experts in delivering content-based instruction. Instead, teachers at Summit act as coaches and guides to help students navigate their own learning. This role shift does not diminish the value of great teachers to Summit's success; in fact, Summit believes that the principle of self-directed learning can help guide teachers to use their time in even more rewarding ways.

### Skills + Content

In Summit's self-directed learning model, the most valuable use of teacher time is to facilitate excellent project-based learning. To do this effectively, Summit has encouraged its teachers to focus more heavily on developing cognitive skills than on teaching basic content. Rather than being a content teacher in history or math who also develops skills, for instance, teachers at Summit become skills teachers who use content to contextualize the skills their students learn. This means instilling cognitive skills such as synthesis and interpretation through projects, and also giving workshops on noncognitive skills such as persistence.

The shift in emphasis from content to skills has been bittersweet for Summit teachers. Beyond the technical shift in role, part of a teacher's professional identity often revolves around the content they know. Some teachers at Summit report a tinge of sorrow in giving up this expertise. For other teachers of intrinsically content-heavy courses – for example, AP Calculus – there are natural constraints on how much of a skills focus they can adopt. And yet, like teachers everywhere, teachers at Summit can each tell stories about students who excelled in high school but floundered in college for lack of cognitive and noncognitive skills. As Summit's self-directed model has progressed, more and more teachers have come to believe that students are learning faster than ever before and are better equipped for the future, thanks in large part to their deeper learning skills.

### Data-Driven Coaching and Mentoring

As teachers shifted to skills-based instruction, they began to spend more and more time as facilitators and coaches of student learning. This occurs to some degree in Project Time when teachers coach students on cognitive skills, but

it is most pronounced during weekly, 10-minute mentor check-ins. While Summit has always had a mentor program, mentorship has taken on new dimensions in a self-directed learning context. Thanks to the technology of the blended learning environment, mentors have at their fingertips data on exactly how each of their 25 students is progressing on both content and cognitive skills. By meeting weekly and having discussions based on this data, mentorship has also become a way to intervene early, in small ways, before students ever enter crisis mode. But most importantly, mentor conversations are opportunities for teachers to reflect with students on their academic progress along with self-directed learning behaviors.

From an outside perspective, mentor conversations sound a lot like coaching discussions in some professional workplace environments. They are open-ended and Socratic. Teachers continually guide students to draw their own conclusions about what they need to learn, what goals to set, and what steps to take to get there. At Summit, good mentors see patterns across how students learn in different areas, and so become a focal point for communication with parents, for collaboration across teacher teams, and for feedback that needs to be delivered to students.

### Letting Go to Go Further

All teachers face daily decisions about when to support students and when to let go, but this balance becomes particularly acute in self-directed learning. For teachers at Summit, giving students additional space to learn and

sometimes struggle for themselves has been among the biggest shifts of the school year. In Personalized Learning Time, for example, when a student fails one, two, or even three weeks of content assessments in a row, sometimes they actually need that micro-experience of failure to help build their skills of resiliency and persistence in the face of challenges. For Summit, this contrasts how students traditionally experience failure in school. In other schools or even in past years of Summit's own model, students might be promoted based on seat time over mastery or insulated from small failures with intensive levels of supports. But this emphasis on avoiding failure at all costs rather than learning and recovering from it can inadvertently set students up for bigger failures later on in life – most often in failing to persist and graduate from college.

For teachers, guiding students to direct their own learning means recognizing when productive struggles and controlled experiences of failure can actually be beneficial. At the same time, interventions are essential. Not passing a few content assessments might lead to a coaching conversation, but when a student fails five assessments in a row a different approach is needed. Over time, Summit's teachers have learned to recognize when a student is struggling too much with self-direction, and tailor personalized support plans accordingly. Like the shift from content to skills, this calibration of support requires new muscles on the part of teachers – one of the reasons that Summit's first-year teachers have been just as successful (and sometimes more so) than their more experienced colleagues in teaching in a self-directed setting.