



YOUTH DRIVING LEARNING

# FRAMEWORK FOR FACILITATING THE EMERGENCE OF LEARNER AGENCY

**GripTape** asserts that learner agency — defined as the ability to make intentional choices about and take an active role in the course of one’s own learning — is the key to a self-reinforcing cycle of learning and development.

We believe that when youth have opportunities to drive their own learning and growth — that is, to practice learner agency — it leads to deeper learning and positive youth development.

Our beliefs are backed by research studies across disciplines and GripTape’s own rapid learning cycles. Despite this evidence, youth and adults alike still struggle to harness the power of learner agency because many of us do not believe young people can drive their own learning. Critically, even if we do believe, we lack a consistent methodology for action.

**This framework seeks to directly address these obstacles by offering a research-based roadmap to facilitate and measure the development of learner agency with the goal of inspiring every young person to accelerate and deepen their learning.**

GripTape developed this framework by pulling from the existing research base and conducting surveys, focus groups, and targeted pilots with hundreds of youth. The result is a set of 15 conditions we argue are the most critical for developing learner agency in young people ages 15-19 years old, coupled with a proposed set of six outcomes for measurement.

## DEFINING LEARNER AGENCY

Learner agency is defined as the ability to make intentional choices about and take an active role in the course of one’s own learning. It results from the interaction of internal and external factors, and is best understood as the composite of a young person’s beliefs, knowledge, skills, actions, relationships, and experiences.

Learner agency is not a fixed state and is best fostered through applied practice as a lived experience. How agentic a young person is can change based on any number of variables, from the topic a youth seeks to learn, to who is engaging with them, to the environment and resources available, or even how they feel on a given day.



In light of the complexity and variability of learner agency, this framework does not set out to measure agency in its own right, but instead proposes we focus on the conditions (inputs) that can lead to its emergence and the changes we see in youth’s actions, hearts, and minds as a result (outputs).

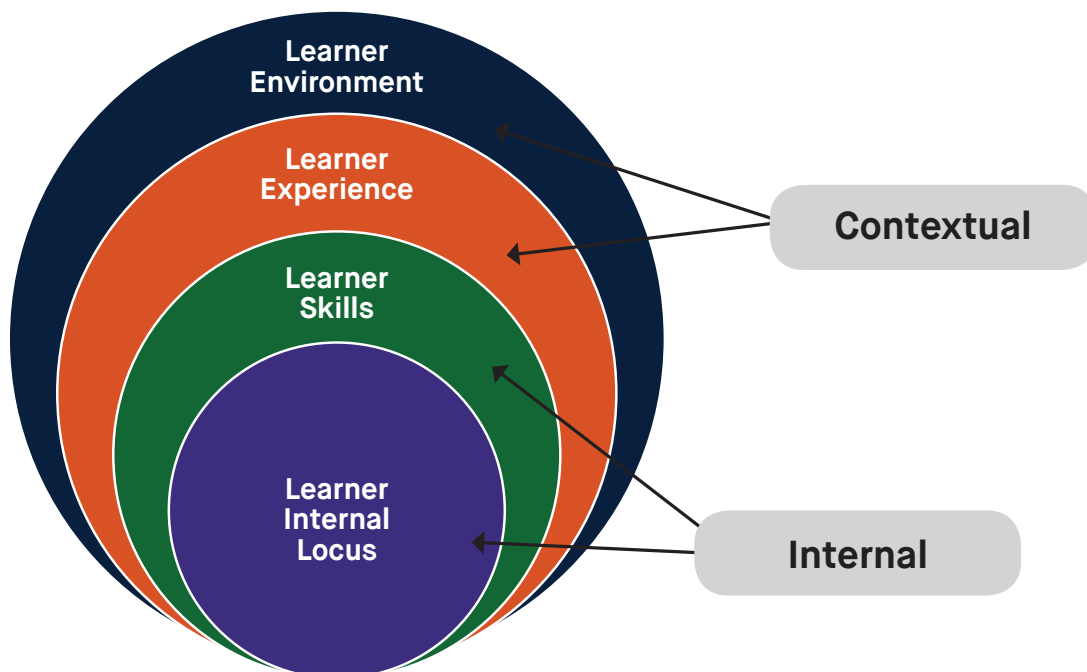
## WHY FACILITATE THE EMERGENCE OF LEARNER AGENCY?

Research studies from a variety of disciplines, including cognitive psychology, education psychology, complexity theory, social and emotional learning, resiliency theory, and the psychology of work, demonstrate the importance of giving youth opportunities to drive their learning and growth, individually and collectively. Effects include elevated achievement levels, greater classroom participation, better self-reflection and preparation for improvement, and decreases in behavioral problems (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Experiences that help promote agency can also drive positive interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes like greater leadership, stronger motivation, higher attendance, improved retention of information and skills, and increased feelings of empowerment and ownership. Such experiences may also lead to advanced demonstrations of civic engagement, planning, and goal-orientation mindsets (Akiva, Jacobs-Priebe & Martin, 2014; Scales, Roehlkepartain & Benson, 2009). Conversely, when students are given fewer opportunities to assume responsibility for their learning, they may develop self-defeating cycles of self-motivational beliefs (Eccles et al., 1993).

Learner agency represents both an approach (an input) and a competency (an output) for learning and development. As youth are offered more opportunities to develop their individual and collective learner agency, they grow as people and become better able to advance their own learning. By promoting learner agency, we are not only able “to elevate academic achievement, but [also] to immerse students in the possibilities of their own minds, to let them see and feel what they can do with their own thinking when they become motivated and get engaged” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

## THE CONDITIONS NEEDED TO FACILITATE THE EMERGENCE OF LEARNER AGENCY

We start by defining the conditions needed for a young person to develop learner agency. We organize these conditions into four nested and interrelated components moving from the internal locus and skills, which lie at the core, to the contextual aspects of the learner experience and environment. The framework focuses on all youth 15 to 19 years of age with full cognitive capacity.



**Internal:** The first two components, driven by the learner’s own interests, are internal, and represent their beliefs and actual and perceived capacity to exercise control over their own learning.

Learner Internal Locus is an individual’s belief in their ability to exercise control over their learning and desire to do so. It is important to note that these beliefs can be learned and developed. In many ways, this is the most critical of our four components, directly impacting how all other influences are enacted and perceived.

Learner Skills are what a person must practice and gain competence in to effectively contribute to, influence, and guide their learning. While the internal locus can propel a learner on the path, completing that learning journey requires a set of core intrapersonal and meta-cognitive competencies, all of which can be developed through practice and a deeper understanding of one’s learning preferences.

**Contextual:** The second set of components are the external contexts and influences that can have a profound effect on a young person’s ability and desire to take ownership over their process of learning. While external, it is important to note that youth can play an active role in shaping these contexts.

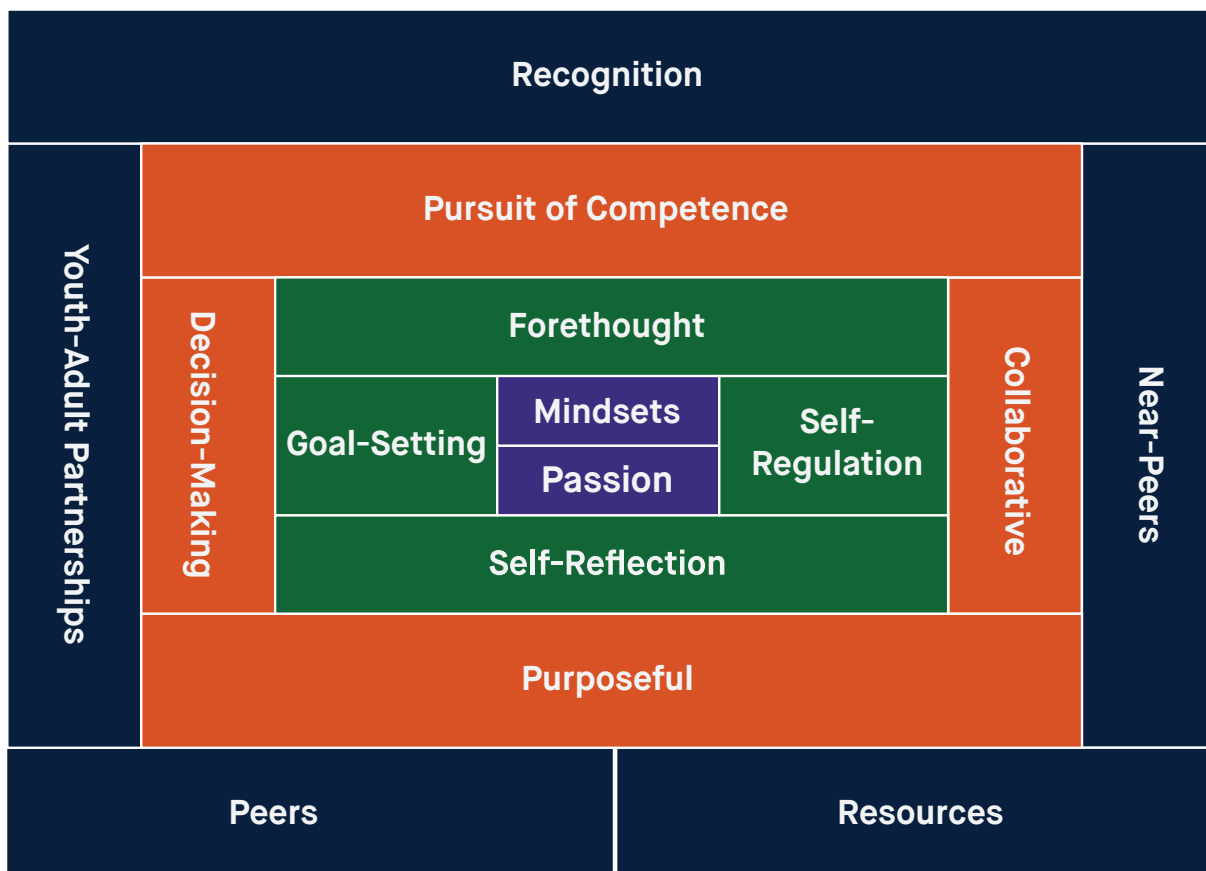
Learner Experience itself must be constructed via developmentally-appropriate experiences that are perceived as valuable by the learner in order to help foster the skills of learner agency, nurture the development of supportive mindsets, and either discover or amplify curiosities, interests, and passions. Ideally, the experience should not be bound by pre-determined time, modality, or location constraints.

Learner Environment is the external context surrounding the learner, including connectedness to adults and near-peers for purposes of accessing supportive relationships, external validation, the influence of peers, and the tangible resources needed for a young person to seize opportunities for learning. This component also builds on interpersonal skills and the critical importance of collaboration to achieve individual and collective learner agency.

### 15 SUB-COMPONENTS

The four components outlined earlier are comprised of 15 sub-components that we posit will most effectively create the necessary conditions to facilitate the emergence of learner agency.

As with the above components, these sub-components are interrelated and move from internal (purple and green) to external (orange and blue) loci, spanning cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and meta-cognitive skills.



Below we offer brief definitions of the 15 sub-components included in our framework.

| Components                      | Definition   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Learner Internal Locus</b>   |  |
| <b>Mindsets</b>                 | Belief in one’s ability and competence, coupled with the conviction that we can all get better and grow; positive mindsets can be learned and developed.   |
| <b>Passion</b>                  | Strong interest in a topic displayed over a sustained period of time that can progress from interest or curiosity to passion.  |
| <b>Learner Skills</b>           |  |
| <b>Forethought</b>              | Ability to set and inform an intention that will guide action plans and strategies (vision).   |
| <b>Goal-Setting</b>             | Ability to set goals and anticipate likely outcomes (plan).  |
| <b>Self-Regulation</b>          | Ability to construct and follow through on an appropriate course of action, and course-correct as needed, building on emotional intelligence (implement).  |
| <b>Self-Reflection</b>          | Ability to reflect on one’s thoughts, actions, and experiences and learn from them (evaluate).   |
| <b>Learner Experience</b>       |  |
| <b>Pursuit of Competence</b>    | Opportunities to learn through appropriately rigorous experiences that lead to greater levels of competence and confidence (positive mindsets).  |
| <b>Decision-Making</b>          | Opportunities to exercise autonomous decision-making over the learning process, experience, and outcomes.  |
| <b>Collaborative</b>            | Learning is interactive and reciprocal, with all involved, youth and adults, learning from each other, sharing ideas, and co-constructing the learning.  |
| <b>Purposeful</b>               | Learning experience is interpreted and perceived by the learner to be relevant and meaningful.   |
| <b>Learner Environment</b>      |  |
| <b>Recognition</b>              | External recognition of learning, including listening and responding.  |
| <b>Youth-Adult Partnerships</b> | Presence of adult role models and champions, who believe in their own agency and engage in equitable, respectful, trusting, and reciprocal relationships.  |
| <b>Near-Peers</b>               | Presence of near-peers (youth 2–3 years older or with greater expertise) as mentors, champions, and role models who can inspire, support, and help learning feel relevant.   |
| <b>Peers</b>                    | Connection to peers who contribute, share, and give feedback in inclusive social experiences that are fluid, engaging, and support a youth’s learning intentions and goals, as well as help to foster collective learner agency. |
| <b>Resources</b>                | Access to the resources (information, tools, space, transportation, time, money, etc.) needed to carry out learning meaningfully.  |

## INTERNAL VS. CONTEXTUAL

While the components are designed to be understood as an interconnected whole, with each capable of influencing others, we see the internal locus and skills as paramount. Extensive research has pointed to the power of positive mindsets and passion to propel a youth forward and, in some instances, beyond their potentially more-competent peers. Indeed, not everyone can exercise learner agency just by putting their minds to it; this would imply that external factors have no bearing on an individual's ability to exercise learner agency — which we know is not accurate (Diemer & Blustein, 2006). However, if we can foster the internal components and an informed sense of possibility, we have a greater chance of youth believing they can be successful and developing the courage to seize ownership over their learning.

## TWO NOTES OF CAUTION

While the components are visually represented as equal parts of a whole, we believe they may be experienced in a variety of combinations and that not all are required to facilitate the emergence of learner agency for every youth. We also recognize there may be a need to tailor application to youth in different circumstances and cultures. We therefore intend this framework to act as a general guide to be informed by and contextualized to each youth and youth-driven learning experience.

Additionally, we want to acknowledge that while other sub-components may contribute to the emergence of learner agency, our hypothesis, backed by learning and research, is that these 15 interrelated sub-components are the most critical to achieve our goal of advancing learner agency through applied practice.

## TESTING THE COMPONENTS: THE GRIPTAPE LEARNING CHALLENGE

In July 2016, GripTape launched the first in an ongoing series of rapid learning cycles to deepen our understanding of learner agency and the components proposed herein. Designed in the form of “Learning Challenges,” these cycles invited 15–19-year-old youth from underserved communities, to identify, plan, and execute their own learning journey. Challengers are given complete decision-making authority over the what, when, where, why, and how of their chosen learning experiences. Youth self-assess against targets they set, using metrics defined by them. We provide them up to \$500, encouragement, and recognition for their efforts — a simple but somewhat radical idea that has been experienced as entirely new by every single Challenger.



**Brian & Nigeria,  
GripTape Learning Challengers**

Analysis of the data and findings from these cycles show that when youth are able to authentically drive their own learning, they are motivated to learn things that are interesting to them and will impact their future; they persist even when faced with challenges or setbacks; they gain important knowledge about both their topic and how they learn; acquire interpersonal and intrapersonal skills; and they have fun doing it! But to be successful they need full decision-making authority, a small amount of money, and a personal champion.

These findings have served to validate our assumptions and provide us with the first of many distinct examples for what works well, for whom, when, and why, with the goal of understanding our framework across a variety of contexts and for youth of varying races, genders, classes, and cultures.

## MEASURING THE EMERGENCE OF LEARNER AGENCY

Given the complexity and variability of learner agency, as defined earlier in this framework, we do not propose nor think it appropriate to measure learner agency as its own outcome. Instead, we seek to assess how the emergence of learner agency ultimately triggers a self-reinforcing cycle of learning and development towards successful young adulthood.



Building off the findings from our learning cycles, we have identified a set of six outcomes we believe represent the shift in actions, hearts, and minds of youth who have increased learner agency.

- **Self-Awareness:** Greater sense of and ability to communicate what one wants to learn
- **Confidence:** Stronger internal locus of control, evidenced by the belief in one's ability and competence and the conviction that one can get better with effort
- **Demanding Opportunities:** Increased demand for learning opportunities to pursue one's interests, demonstrated through actions and communication
- **Seizing Opportunities:** Greater tendency to seize available learning opportunities and to create new ones
- **Skills & Competencies:** Demonstrated increase in skills and competencies needed to achieve the goals one sets for oneself, including forethought, self-regulation, goal-setting, and self-reflection
- **Activation:** Intensified desire and efforts to impact the world around oneself and inspire other youth to demand and pursue learning

Importantly, we hypothesize that these outcomes may emerge in youth in differing orders and combinations. Indeed, we believe that these outcomes need not all be present, nor that they must follow a standard progression.

We are at the beginning stages of exploring the best ways to measure and test these outcomes, work that will be a primary focus of our upcoming learning cycles. We are heartened that these outcomes reflect a large body of related research that includes growth mindset, grit, metacognition, mastery learning, motivation and engagement, and peer relationships. As we move forward, we intend to continue to draw deeply on these domains.

## THE FRAMEWORK AND AGENCY IN CONTEXT

This framework is distinct and yet complementary to other prominent learning approaches, such as personalized learning, student-centered learning, and youth development. These all include agency as a component of their success, but without an explicit understanding of how it can be promoted and enhanced, they run the risk of defaulting to the resident adult driving the learning experience. To clarify, there is a role for adults and near-peers in fostering learner agency. However, we begin with the assumption that youth are capable of leading, and through our learning, hope to understand how best to insert resources, people, and capital in ways that do not reduce the emergence of learner agency.

**We begin with the assumption that youth are capable of leading, and through our learning, hope to understand how best to insert resources, people, and capital in ways that do not reduce the emergence of learner agency.**

It is also important to note the strong overlap with the five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies of social and emotional learning. The notion of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, is embedded in many of our components and absolutely critical to youth success (CASEL, 2015).

## NEXT STEPS

We see this framework as continuously evolving. It is our intention to test the hypotheses embedded herein through ongoing rapid learning cycles such as the GripTape Learning Challenge, as well as through data collection, analysis, and collaboration with a select group of youth and adult partners across the education ecosystem.

With this learning, we seek greater insight into many questions but highlight several below that are particularly important to our work:

- Are the outcome measures inspiring to youth? How can we assess and track them? And what is the role of youth in their measurement?
- What are the metrics for these outcomes? And how do the latter interact with the conditions?
- What is needed for this framework to inspire and empower youth themselves?
- How far can we push the boundary of youth leading in the absence of adult guidance?
- Of our 15 sub-components, which are most critical? Are they all truly necessary? In what combination(s)? And in what ways do they interact?
- Are certain components pre-conditions, or can they all be developed in practice?
- To what degree is learner agency an individual and/or collective state? And how does this impact the outcomes?
- Is there a continuum for learner agency that moves from simple voice to full autonomy, and if so, how does this impact the application of the framework?
- How does the application of this framework change, if at all, for youth in differing contexts and cultures?
- What is required to push this framework from a semi-helpful exercise in naming to a powerful resource for action and change?
- How do we leverage this framework to influence policy?

## ABOUT GRIPTAPE

Grip tape is an anti-slip adhesive used by skateboarders to anchor themselves to their board so they can take control of where they want to go and how they want to get there. GripTape, the organization, gives young people the traction they need to seize control of their own learning, choose their purposes, and achieve their full potential. GripTape is an initiative of the America Achieves accelerator, and part of a community of change-leaders seeking systems change across education.



GripTape Youth Leadership Board



## REFERENCES

- Akiva, T., Jacobs-Priebe, L., & Martin, K. (2014). *Youth-adult partnerships in Pittsburgh: Findings from a study of programs for youth voice, decision-making, and leadership in the context of the Pittsburgh Hive*. [Unpublished Manuscript].
- Bandura, A. (2006). Towards a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(2), 164-173. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/journals/perspectives>
- CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/>
- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. New York: Free Press.
- Dangwal, R. and Kapur, P. (2009). Learning through teaching: Peer-mediated instruction in minimally invasive education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 40, 5–22.
- Diemer, M. A., & Blustein, D. L. (2006). Critical consciousness and career development among urban youth. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 68(2), 220–232.
- Duckworth, A., Peterson, C., Matthews, M., Kelly, D. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087–1101.
- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House.
- Eccles, J. (1983). Expectancies, values, and academic behaviors. In J. T. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and achievement motives: Psychological and sociological approaches* (pp.75-146). San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Eccles, J., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C.M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Maclver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: *The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families*. *American Psychologist*, 48, 90–101.
- GripTape (2016). *GripTape Learning Challenge 2: Summary of Findings*. New York, NY.
- Ito, M. et al. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.
- Mercer, S. (2012). *The complexity of learner agency*. *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 6(2), 41–59.
- Morton, M., Montgomery, P. (2011). Youth empowerment programs for improving self-efficacy and self-esteem of adolescents. *Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Self- Efficacy and Self-Esteem of Adolescents*. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265439401\\_Youth\\_Empowerment\\_Programs\\_for\\_Improving\\_Self-\\_Efficacy\\_and\\_Self-Esteem\\_of\\_Adolescents](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265439401_Youth_Empowerment_Programs_for_Improving_Self-_Efficacy_and_Self-Esteem_of_Adolescents)
- Nagaoka, J. et al. (2015). *Young Adult Success Report. Foundations for young adult success*. Retrieved from <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/foundations-young-adult-success-developmental-framework>



- National Research Council. (2012). Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century. In J.W. Pellegrino and M.L. Hilton, (Eds), Board on Testing and Assessment and Board on Science Education, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Pajares, F & Schunk, D. (2001). Self-beliefs and school success: Self-efficacy, self-concept, and school achievement. In R. Riding & S. Rayner (Eds.), *International perspectives on individual differences* (pp. 239-265). London: Ablex publishing.
- Reeve, J. (2013). How Students Create Motivationally Supportive Learning Environments for Themselves: The Concept of Agentic Engagement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. [Unpublished Manuscript].
- Scales, P., Roehlkepartain, E., & Benson, P. (2009). The Untapped Strength of 15-Year Olds Teen Voice Report. Retrieved from [http://www.searchinstitute.org/sites/default/files/a/TeenVoiceReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.searchinstitute.org/sites/default/files/a/TeenVoiceReport_FINAL.pdf)
- Toshalis, E. & Nakkula, M .J. (2012). Motivation, engagement and student voice. Retrieved from <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/topics/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice>
- Wong, N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., & Parker, E. A. (2010). A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1), 100-114.
- Yeager, D.S., Dahl, R. & Dweck C. S. (2016). The adolescent paradox: Why Adolescent Behavior-Change Programs Typically Fail but Could Succeed. [Unpublished Manuscript].

---

<sup>i</sup> Defining Cognitive, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Domains

The Cognitive Domain includes three clusters of competencies: cognitive processes and strategies, knowledge, and creativity. These clusters include competencies, such as critical thinking, information literacy, reasoning and argumentation, and innovation.

The Intrapersonal Domain includes three clusters of competencies: intellectual openness, work ethic and conscientiousness, and positive core self-evaluation. These clusters include competencies, such as flexibility, initiative, appreciation for diversity, and metacognition (the ability to reflect on one's own learning and make adjustments accordingly).

The Interpersonal Domain includes two clusters of competencies: teamwork and collaboration and leadership. These clusters include competencies, such as communication, collaboration, responsibility, and conflict resolution. (National Research Council, 2012).