Despite decades of educational reform efforts, U.S. schools face a fundamental challenge: too few American students are acquiring the complex knowledge and deeper learning skills required to become engaged and productive citizens of a changing world. Indeed, to ensure coverage of topics mandated by state accountability assessments, teachers often sacrifice depth of content coverage in favor of breadth. Such practices are more pronounced in schools serving disproportionate numbers of students of color and students living in poverty. Public and political recognition of this problem has contributed to the development and widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, a surging interest in international comparisons on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA – in which students apply their academic knowledge to novel real-world problems), and increased attention to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and dispositions that many believe are critical for student persistence, attainment, and long-term success in college and careers.

Several philanthropic foundations have focused their education funding efforts on popularizing “deeper learning,” characterized as six interconnected sets of abilities: mastery of core academic content, critical thinking and complex problem-solving, effective communication, collaboration skills, independent learning, and academic mindset. Yet the research on deeper learning severely lags behind the political and educational interest. A recent NRC panel noted the limitations of existing (primarily correlational) research in establishing linkages between 21st Century/deeper learning competencies and long-term outcomes for students. Nonetheless, the panel concluded that cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal competencies can be taught and learned in ways that promote transfer to novel situations, and they recommended that foundations and federal agencies support further research in this arena.

The quasi-experimental proof-of-concept study on which the proposed symposium is based explores whether a set of schools belonging to networks that purport to promote deeper learning actually deliver on that promise and whether they do so for traditionally underserved as well as advantaged students. The research team selected 11 pairs of high schools, each containing a mature network school and a comparable non-network site in the same jurisdiction and then used propensity scores to match students in each pair on demographics and prior achievement for 5 cohorts of entering ninth-graders (2007-2011). Data sources included teacher and student surveys, case studies, analysis of teachers’ assignments, results on state tests and the OECD PISA-based Test for Schools assessment, graduation rates, and matriculation in post-secondary education.

The first paper outlines the study design and methodology, including challenges to the design encountered in settings impacted by fiscal retrenchment and high stakes accountability. The second paper examines students’ opportunities to engage in deeper learning processes in the network and comparison sites and describes how these opportunities were structured and supported in these schools. The third paper then focuses on deeper learning outcomes in terms of academic achievement, student dispositions, and attainment (both graduation and post-secondary matriculation). Findings indicate significant and positive differential deeper learning opportunities and outcomes in network schools and suggest the potential for schools serving high proportions of underserved students to successfully engage in deeper learning instructional approaches.