

# The Way Forward for Assessment

AS THIS ISSUE of *Liberal Education* goes to press, we have just received news that AAC&U was awarded a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to support a collaborative project on student learning assessment. The FIPSE grant will fund *Rising to the Challenge: Meaningful Assessment of Student Learning*, a project that establishes a consortium among AAC&U, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges to build campus leadership and capacity to implement meaningful approaches to student learning assessment and use assessment results to raise the level and quality of student achievement.

This development comes at a pivotal moment in the history of American higher education. As we all know, our society has been exceptionally well served by the varied, accessible, and

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

intellectually self-directed colleges and universities in our country—and by the vitality and creativity of our faculty. As a result of their work, the American system of higher education is envied—and emulated—throughout the world. However, as the LEAP report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, makes plain, we have entered a new era. It is now more urgent than ever before for higher education to overcome four fundamental challenges. Each of these challenges calls, first and foremost, for new forms of creativity and collaborative leadership on the part of college faculty. And each calls on faculty and other academic leaders to use assessment far more creatively, as a way to both focus and strengthen the quality of student learning.

What are these challenges?

First, we need to raise the level of degree completion. Most Americans will certainly need education beyond high school to prosper economically. But with degree attainment holding steady for over a generation at about one-third of the population, we must find ways to help a much higher percentage of Americans prepare for college and actually complete their degrees—two-year degrees and four-year degrees. We must do this to help Americans fulfill their own hopes for the future and to maintain our global leadership.

Second, we must ensure that the college degree represents high levels of educational challenge and accomplishment. To stay competitive in the global knowledge economy, employers now actively seek graduates who possess broad knowledge in areas such as science, the global context, and diverse cultures. They also look for graduates with sophisticated analytical, quantitative, and technological skills; excellent communication and intercultural capacities; and the ability to apply their knowledge creatively to real-world challenges and settings. Sixty-three percent of employers report that many college graduates fall short on these expectations. The world itself is demanding more of college graduates than ever before, and we, as a community, must use our creativity to help all our students meet these high expectations.

Third, we must help the public and our students recognize that higher education has an obligation to democracy as well as to the economy. As Benjamin Franklin famously remarked following the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the founders gave us “a republic—if you can keep it.” Today, our republic faces daunting challenges at home as well as abroad. A college degree should ensure that graduates are knowledgeable about their democratic, cultural, and global heritage and well prepared to contribute, as engaged and active citizens, to the work of renewing the public square and helping to solve life-threatening problems at home and around the globe.

Finally, postsecondary education will need to foster these high levels of college attainment for students and communities that, historically, have been underserved at all levels of the American educational system. College access and degree completion are still sharply stratified by income and ethnicity. But with the demographic composition of American society now changing very rapidly, the United States can maintain its economic and civic vitality only if it reverses these inherited inequities. We must make a new commitment to help the millions of students from traditionally underserved communities both enroll in college and graduate well prepared—for creative and successful careers, for civic participation, and for fulfilling lives.

These four challenges place the national debates about assessment and accountability, which have gained such steam over the past year, in their appropriate context. As AAC&U has affirmed before, assessment is a crucial tool for helping colleges and universities set educational goals in the context of these social obligations; examine and report their own progress; and make needed improvements in their educational programs. It is also a crucial tool for helping students take active responsibility for adopting high standards and assessing their own educational progress.

The danger, however, is that assessment of student learning will remain an underdeveloped resource for all these purposes. The crucial question is whether we can develop forms of assessment that are led by faculty, useful to faculty, reflective of scholarly values, and above all, a positive resource both for faculty members’ work and for students’ deeper learning. As AAC&U moves forward with the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, with the new assessment initiative, and with our continuing work on linking assessment to the aims and outcomes of an empowering liberal education, we will hold these commitments centrally in mind. Our intention is to collaborate with faculty across the country and to draw from the many centers of creative, faculty-led assessment that have already developed.

There is only one useful way forward for assessment. And that is to adopt assessment practices that build from and reinforce the sources of higher education’s historic strengths, especially the root strengths of faculty leadership, intellectual freedom, diversity, and creativity.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

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