

The Clark/AAC&U Challenge: Connecting Liberal Education with Real-World Practice

In January, AAC&U's campaign for Liberal Education and America's Promise, or LEAP, will reach the halfway mark. We launched the initiative in January 2005 and promised to continue through January 2015, AAC&U's centennial anniversary. The ultimate goal, as I hope readers already know, is to make the aims and intended outcomes of liberal education the preferred framework for all students' college learning, whatever their background, career aspirations, or life circumstances. (For additional background and information on the LEAP initiative, please visit www.aacu.org/leap).

The current national focus on access and completion—the twin priorities for bills pending in the House and the Senate—provides a sobering reminder that LEAP still has a long way to go to achieve that goal. While it is now a policy priority to ensure “some form of postsecondary learning” for all or

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

most Americans, both the House and Senate bills go out of their way to avoid making any nuanced distinctions between a high-quality college education and forms of learning that are, by design, short-term, closely focused on a specific set of job skills, or disconnected from any larger responsibility for either the student's overall development or the future of our society.

This studied lack of policy attention to what really matters in college might be taken as a backhanded compliment to higher education: “whatever you're doing, it's a good thing! Do more of it for more people!” But, in fact, this “whatever” mentality is already moving huge amounts of federal money to programs that serve short-term demands rather than long-term U.S. needs and interests. For example, disproportionate amounts of Pell Grant support for low-income students already flow to programs that used to be called “trade school” but now have been relabeled “college.” The result, for many, is time and money spent badly. Investing citizens' tax dollars in illiberal education is the equivalent of bundling “liar loans” into securities and trading them for huge profits. If we keep doing it, we can expect similar depletion of our most important national resource: American capabilities.

If the nation is going to make a huge new investment in postsecondary learning—as it must—then we need, as a society, to establish a clear understanding of the kind of learning that will build meaningful opportunity for Americans and a vibrant future for our society. This is what the LEAP initiative is all about. It has brought educators *and* employers together around a shared and contemporary conception of essential learning outcomes. Graduates who achieve those outcomes will be liberally educated—and prepared for a demanding economy, as well.

The counterargument we can expect from policy makers is that today's students need jobs. Implicitly and often explicitly, they resist liberal education as a luxury that an economically anxious country just can't afford. In fact, it's just what an economically anxious country needs most!

For too long, proponents of liberal education have accepted the basic premise of this policy resistance, agreeing or even insisting that liberal education is really about the love of learning—“learning for its own sake”—and, therefore, different in both ethos and spirit from the kinds of learning that make students employable and promotable. Or, ignoring the economic point, we have insisted that liberal education is a necessary preparation for democracy and a self-governing citizenry. Notwithstanding the very real merits of these positions, they have hardly won the day. Even as the United

States declares college a prerequisite for opportunity and success, the nation has gone “agnostic” on what students need to accomplish while in college.

Both this issue of *Liberal Education*, and the LEAP initiative with which it is connected, propose that we need to make—and support—a very different argument about the importance and value of liberal learning.

In the twentieth century, proponents of liberal learning drew a sharp dividing line between “practical” or career studies and the “true liberal arts.” Today, we contend, we need to erase that distinction and insist that liberal education is, among its other virtues, practical. In a turbulent economy where industries are awash in change and where the combination of inventiveness and judgment is key to any organization’s future, the most practical possible education is one that prepares students to make sense of complexity, to chart a course of action that takes full account of context, to engage in continuous learning, and to take responsibility for the quality and integrity of what they do.

In the words of the Clark/AAC&U conference whose papers are synthesized in this issue, a good liberal education should take pride in preparing students for “effective practice.” And how well it actually does that needs to become one of the hallmarks of excellence in this new global century.

Richard Freeland, who, with colleagues at Clark University and with me, designed the Clark/AAC&U conference, calls on us all to recognize that engagement with the world of practice helps us fulfill the most enduring goals of liberal education: deep understanding, the integration of ideas with values, and thoughtful reflection on one’s responsibilities to self and others. Building from years of research into successful intelligence, Tufts’s Robert Sternberg shows how and why attention to a fuller set of goals for learning not only helps us make better decisions, but also allows us to break free of the exclusions that have characterized “elite” education for much too long. Vanderbilt’s Janet Eyster underscores the importance of experiential learning as a catalyst for much that is important and powerful in a life-enhancing liberal education. But she also points to the qualitative dimensions that are too often neglected when we add a “field” component to the undergraduate curriculum.

I was also struck that the wonderful paper from Miami of Ohio’s David Hodge, Marcia Baxter Magolda, and Carolyn Haynes, and the fine paper from our colleagues at Lawrence University—which was submitted to *Liberal Education* outside the conference format—both make, in very different institutional contexts, the same essential point. If our goal is to teach students how to see themselves as makers of both meaning and important decisions, then the curriculum needs to lead them, in a purposeful and developmental way, through forms of learning that model the intended capabilities and provide successively more challenging ways of practicing them.

The Clark/AAC&U conference showed that we know what we need to help students achieve and that we also understand how to mobilize educational resources to help students apply their learning to unscripted questions and real-world contexts. But the policy challenge still remains. Collectively, we need to create new engagement *with* policy leaders to help them think harder—and wider—about what it will take to reap the full benefit of the national investment in postsecondary learning.

It took a long time to persuade policy makers that a rigorous high school curriculum was the best predictor of college success. But schools leaders have finally won that battle. Now we need to persuade policy makers that a rigorous and multidimensional *college* curriculum is the best predictor of economic success. Embracing—and deepening—the strong connections between liberal learning and effective practice is a necessary first step.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

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