

Liberal Education

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at Home and Abroad

Liberal Education's New Premium

BARBARA LAWTON



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More precise definition of the essential outcomes of a liberal education for a student, state, and nation requires empowering the entire community to enter the debate



**Barbara Lawton,
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increase the number of citizens carrying a baccalaureate degree. You would think it an easy job to convince our lawmakers to maintain a strong and accessible university system, but the numbers tell a different story.

General purpose state revenue (GPR) to the UW System has fallen precipitously over the

past ten years. Our contribution per FTE is 14 percent below the national average, lodging us solidly in the bottom at number forty-six. GPR as a percentage of the university system budget has followed national trends; at 24 percent, it is only half of what it was thirty years ago. If we slice the numbers to show



I am confident we will recapture the public's imagination and re-center liberal education in our plans for Wisconsin's future



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examine its own practices related to equal opportunity for women and minorities in its employ, and bring them into alignment with its goals for students.

- Undergraduate programs will follow the lead of top business schools, and introduce more interdisciplinary work to foster more creative problem solving in an increasingly complex world.
- Expanded undergraduate research opportunities will underscore and strengthen the

relationship between scholarly work, creativity, multiple disciplines, and the community.

- The state will create a visible matrix of opportunity to help students connect the dots between a liberal arts degree and their career aspirations.
- Institutions of higher education will collaborate with the state to define and collect the data necessary to drive effective advocacy with vivid, convincing narratives.



- The argument for public investment to make a liberal education broadly accessible and affordable will be data-driven and advanced in economic terms. And the metrics to gauge return on that investment will measure progress of both students and of the community and state, and will be checked annually to ensure that we stay on course.
- That argument for investment in a liberal education will emphasize the importance of preserving the independence of our great universities if they are to both rise above and serve the competing interests of those in the private sector.
- There will be a statewide echo of public testimony as to the value of a liberal education, led by the business community, recorded by the media, and repeated in a wide variety of settings by unexpected voices.
- The media will provide ongoing coverage of the campaign as a project of civic journalism.
- We will be strategic: instead of just lobbying legislative leaders, we will create for them a constituency for reinvestment in liberal education, one characterized by a sense of joint ownership, across sectors, for success.
- Lawmakers will respond by committing to maintaining a system of higher education that balances the twin demands of excellence and mass access.
- LEAP will require and foster bold, collaborative leadership, with participation from the academy, the state house, and the private sector.

Our task is to ensure that our nation builds the workforce necessary to stay in front in an era of global competition. From Green Bay to New York to Austin to San Diego, the promise of opportunity—for women, for minorities and children of immigrants, for young professionals, for established and upstart businesses—depends on the possibility in each place of upward mobility beginning on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder.

We can guarantee that mobility—and, therefore, a robust and productive workforce, increased earnings, and a more desirable climate for investment—if we build confidence in and access to a great liberal education.

Back to that budget provision. I truly believe that the commitment our states and our nation must make to higher education can only proceed from a common and clear understanding of its enduring public value. We must engage all citizens to own the outcome of public debate that sets our priorities. A system of grants administered by the federal government will merely add another layer of bureaucracy and create greater distance between citizens and education issues.

LEAP's premise that intellectual rigor and virtue in multiple disciplines are practical survival tools for twenty-first-century life, if broadly accepted, will inevitably drive government and educational institutions to evolve, to innovate in response. It will indeed, then, become the framework by which we write our nation's future. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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