

Accountability

From Weak Choices to Best Work

Sometime soon, the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education will make its recommendations to the nation about ways to strengthen access, affordability, and accountability. AAC&U leaders are following the accountability debates with particular attention, because they dovetail with our own continuing focus on the aims and outcomes of a twenty-first-century liberal education.

In our view, intentionality and accountability are two sides of the same coin. In order to ensure the quality of students' actual learning, we—the academy in partnership with the community—must identify the learning outcomes all students need and make these outcomes a shared frame-

work for *both* intentionality *and* accountability.

P R E S I D E N T ' S M E S S A G E

Through the Greater Expectations initiative, we have done just that. In dialogue with the academy, accreditors, and employers, AAC&U has identified a widely endorsed set of learning outcomes that mark the defining difference between readiness for success, on the one hand, and underachievement in college, on the other. As we wrote in a public letter to the Spellings Commission, *these* are the aims and outcomes for which we should hold ourselves accountable.

Through Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), we now are working to both build public understanding of these essential outcomes and reinforce campus efforts to foster them across the curriculum.

For your convenience, we print a summary of the essential learning outcomes here (see sidebar). These broad purposes are a template, not a curriculum; they need to be translated within different institutional missions and the many different academic fields. Nonetheless, these outcomes are today's *sine qua non*. Students who do not acquire them will be underprepared for work, citizenship, and daily life.

Reading the tea leaves, we worry that, in response to the accountability issue, the Spellings Commission seems to be considering one or more weak choices. The first is to say little or nothing about the key aims and outcomes of a twenty-first-century education, while calling for campuses and states to experiment with tests in order to measure and compare student learning.

Self-evidently, every test is organized around key decisions about what students need to know and be able to do. To say nothing about purposes while embracing tests is to leave fundamental decisions about the important outcomes of a college education to the testing industry. The truth is that we've been experimenting with just this strategy in the schools for over half a century, first through the reign of the SAT and more recently through the myriad tests of high school learning that are now required in the states. To say the least, this has not been a formula for world-class accomplishment.

The second weak choice the commission seems to be considering is to fall back on that hardy perennial, general education. Commission Chair Charles Miller produced a paper in his own name that endorses standardized tests designed to assess general education outcomes. The problem with

using these as the “accountability” measure is that they only address a fraction of the curriculum. Tests of general education were not designed to assess learning in the major, and findings from them can have no influence on the areas of work where both students and faculty are most invested.

AAC&U’s work on learning outcomes and our proposed framework for accountability were addressed in commission hearings and in background papers. But the discussants seemed to think our recommendations apply to the general education curriculum alone, or, as Chair Miller described it, “the core learning and skills that anyone with a liberal arts degree should have.”

This is a fundamental misreading of the AAC&U recommendations. The outcomes we recommend are essential not only to general education or to arts and sciences degrees, but also to business, accounting, engineering, health professionals, technology, and every other sphere of endeavor. These liberal education outcomes are not the responsibility of selected disciplines alone!

The essential outcomes will be achieved only if students work on them across the curriculum, in their majors—*all majors*—as well as in general education. To put it differently, **if the majors do not take responsibility for the essential outcomes of a twenty-first-century college education, those outcomes will not be achieved.**

The essential learning outcomes take different forms depending on the individual student’s choice of major. An editor and an engineer, for example, should both achieve all the essential outcomes, but they will apply their knowledge and skills in quite different ways. For this reason, curriculum-embedded assessments are the most powerful and reliable way both of focusing student and faculty attention on the intended outcomes and of demonstrating students’ highest levels of achievement.

The foundations for this “best work” strategy have already been laid. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, 60 percent of today’s seniors complete some sort of capstone work. Some colleges, including community colleges, have also built milestone projects, portfolios, and qualifying performances into the sophomore or junior year as well. The right course for American higher education is to build from these examples to bring both intentionality and accountability centrally into the college curriculum—not just for a statistically significant sample of students, but for all students!

Let’s be honest with ourselves. We’re talking about accountability because we know that many students are leaving college half-educated. There’s little to be gained from five more years of “testing” that proposition and arguing about the adequacy of the tests to their intended purposes.

There is no quick fix for the broad problem of underachievement. But there is a huge body of tested innovation that tells us where we need to go. We need a “best work” approach that tells all students what will be expected, translates broad outcomes to specific contexts, sets high standards, and helps each student prepare to meet those standards in the context of his or her most advanced work and chosen major.

This—and only this—will achieve the long-term purpose of our “accountability” debates: new intentionality and new effectiveness in preparing all students for a very demanding world.

—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

Essential Learning Outcomes

- *Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Natural World* (science, social sciences, mathematics, humanities, arts)
- *Intellectual and Practical Skills* (written and oral communication; inquiry, critical and creative thinking; quantitative literacy; information literacy; teamwork; problem solving)
- *Individual and Social Responsibility* (civic responsibility and engagement; ethical reasoning; intercultural knowledge and actions; propensity for lifelong learning)
- *Integrative and Applied Learning* (the capacity to adapt knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and questions)