

# Give Students a Compass: Can General Education Rise to the Challenge?

AAC&U members are strongly committed to general education, and the association is a recognized resource for institutions that are taking a fresh look at general education and its assessment. Now, through our newest national project—**Give Students a Compass: College Learning, General Education, and Student Success**—AAC&U members are poised to lead a next generation of work on the design and practice of general education.

Funded by Carnegie Corporation, State Farm, and the participating partners, the Compass project is part of AAC&U's ongoing initiative Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP). Through Compass, campus faculty and other academic leaders in three state systems—Wisconsin, Oregon, and California State University—will work to map expected student learning outcomes, deploy “high-impact” educational practices that help students

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achieve the intended outcomes, and adopt educationally meaningful

assessment strategies for general education. As a point of departure, all three systems will use the LEAP “essential learning outcomes” (see [www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm)). Making general education “work” for underserved students will be a strong and sustained focus of the Compass project.

As AAC&U has said consistently through its Greater Expectations initiative (2000–2006) and now through LEAP: if higher education is to foster intentional and integrative learning in students, then we ourselves need to become more intentional in clarifying our shared purposes and designing curricular pathways that support them. The Compass project will test our collective capacity to respond to this challenge.

We need to be honest about the full scope of the problems that beset general education today. General education is the academic “commons” of higher education, yet all the practical resources—faculty, teaching time, rewards, scholarly work—have long since been assigned to departments. This depletion of the commons has, in turn, left general education fragmented and incoherent.

To make general education “work,” we need to create new practices that will reliably provide it with a strong, ongoing educational vision and continuously nurture strong intellectual, collaborative, cross-disciplinary leadership committed to the importance of that vision. And we need to provide general education programs with practical resources such as dedicated budgets, a predictable fraction of faculty time allocations, ongoing guidance for new faculty (including adjuncts!), and an accounting system keyed to learning rather than to departments' compilation of student credit hours alone.

Even as we face these chronic problems, there really are strong reasons for hope. The ultimate question for general education today is: what's the purpose? For a very long time, the main purpose has seemed to be the provision of content coverage through required survey courses in various “distribution” categories. Distribution was the latest thing in

1911, and it should embarrass us all that it remains so dominant a design a full century later. But even as the distribution strategy continues to predominate, many campuses have developed general education purposes and programs that are much more vibrantly attuned to the contemporary world. The Compass project will draw directly from these veins of educational creativity.

One useful catalyst for new direction in general education is the call to “be accountable,” which leads us back to much-needed discussions of core purposes: accountable for what? AAC&U members have been engaged in such discussions for a decade—long before Secretary Spellings turned her lens on higher education. The LEAP-recommended framework of essential learning outcomes draws directly on the results of literally hundreds of campus dialogues that asked, What are the most important aims and outcomes of a good undergraduate education, and how do we help students achieve them? The LEAP answers, which came *from* faculty, provide a fresh framing for undergraduate learning and general education in our time: broad knowledge of the wider world; high-level intellectual *and* practical skills; an examined sense of personal and social responsibility; the demonstrated ability to apply one’s integrative learning to new problems and settings.

This vision for student learning does not preclude the inclusion of disciplinary surveys, but it certainly cannot be enacted by a general education program that is restricted to such studies alone. And, more constructively, it points us toward the power and value of *integrative* educational practices: vertical rather than foundational designs for general education; “big questions” studied across multiple courses that help students gain insight into the wider world; a strong emphasis on practicing and demonstrating advanced intellectual and practical skills; engagement with significant ethical, civic, and societal questions, both enduring and contemporary; integrative assignments and experiences, anchored at progressively more advanced points across both general and specialized studies.

Another catalyst for general education renewal is new research showing that higher education is beginning to see “high-impact” results from a long list of engaged learning practices that have been developed over the last twenty years: learning communities, service learning, diversity and global studies, undergraduate research, collaborative studies, capstone projects and the like. All of these practices have been tested in the context of general education. The good news is that they raise student performance, with particularly noteworthy benefits for students from underserved communities.

So what’s new about the Compass project? In brief: its clarity about the purposes of general education; its focus on practices that demonstrably raise achievement, especially for the most vulnerable students; its emphasis on assessments that deepen as well as document learning; its recognition that “coverage” is not enough; its attention to global and intercultural learning; and above all else, its determination to help students themselves internalize new standards for what matters in college. General education is poised to drive a new vitality in liberal education. Giving students a compass, it turns out, can help the academy itself more successfully fulfill our educational mission.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

**Higher education is beginning to see “high-impact” results from a long list of engaged learning practices**