

**Draft Statement on a Proposed
National Campaign for Liberal Education**

**Sounding the Call for Liberal Education
Because Every Student Deserves Our Best**

Preface

There is widespread agreement that college has become an imperative for success in twenty-first century America. Sophisticated knowledge and skills now fuel the economy and have become key determinants of both professional creativity and economic opportunity. Simultaneously Americans as citizens face challenges—at home and abroad—that are unprecedented in their complexity and in their demands on human knowledge and ingenuity. This is an era of greater expectations for knowledge, skill, and continuous learning in every arena of contemporary life.

In response, there are vigorous efforts at every level to expand access to college. Families seek college access; schools promote it; policy leaders and presidential candidates warmly endorse it. The rates of actual college enrollment remain inequitable, with low-income students and many communities of color still lagging behind. But the overall trend is clear. College has become for the twenty-first century what high school became in the twentieth, the expected point of departure for full participation both in the economy and in civic life.

For all the importance now placed on college, however, there is stunningly little public attention paid to what students ought to accomplish in college. Public debate focuses almost exclusively on access and affordability. Intermittent policy calls for educational “accountability” prove vacuous because there is virtually no national dialogue—much less any consensus—around the questions: What is college for? What kinds of learning really matter in college—and in contemporary life? How do we ensure that graduates are really prepared for a lifetime of continuous learning? This vacuum is so taken for granted that some policymakers now propose to hold colleges and universities “accountable” just for their rates of graduation, as though seat-time is synonymous with actual accomplishment.

Sounding the Call for Liberal Education

Recognizing the public stake in the actual quality of college-level learning, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) proposes to shape a broad national dialogue on these issues. This national dialogue, *Sounding the Call*, will build on the success of AAC&U Presidents’ Campaign for the Advancement of Liberal Learning (CALL), will examine the historic and contemporary importance of liberal education in our society, and will document the value of a challenging and horizon-expanding liberal education for all students, whatever their backgrounds or professional aspirations.

Sounding the Call will be led by a coalition for liberal education. Working with policy leaders, the media, and campuses, the coalition will organize a broad public examination of the kinds of learning students need for the twenty-first century. The coalition also will publicize changes already emerging in the academy that can help today’s diverse students reap the full benefits of their participation in higher education.

This proposed campaign, *Sounding the Call*, will be designed to:

Spark public debate about the kinds of knowledge, skills and values needed to prepare college students for a new era of “greater expectations”;

Confront the inherent inequities in current practices that steer low-income students to college programs that teach job skills alone, while more advantaged students reap the full benefits of a first-rate liberal education;

Support every student’s right to an education—beginning in school and culminating in college—that develops intellectual and ethical judgment; expands cultural, societal and scientific horizons; cultivates democratic and global knowledge and engagement, **and also** prepares learners for successful participation in a dynamic and rapidly evolving economy;

Challenge and change the widespread belief that students must choose either a practical education **or** a liberal education;

Mobilize support for changes on campus that already are producing a new synthesis of practical and liberal education;

Sustain public engagement with the quality and level of college students’ preparation for, participation in, and cumulative accomplishment in liberal education.

A Coalition for Liberal Education

A proposed coalition formed by AAC&U will lead this campaign in partnership with AAC&U’s membership and Board of Directors.

As envisioned, the coalition will be led by 30 business, civic, and public policy leaders, including school leaders. Coalition leaders will be chosen for their commitment to higher education, their ability to win public attention, and their willingness to serve as advocates for liberal education as the best form of learning for twenty-first century college students. The coalition will include the voices of college presidents and academic leaders through a working relationship with the AAC&U Board of Directors and member campuses. The coalition will consciously work to engage business and policy leaders who raise challenging and skeptical questions about the contemporary value of liberal education.

Coalition leaders will guide a carefully planned and targeted public information campaign in support of liberal education for all students. The focus and themes of this campaign will evolve over time and may tie its communications effort to “trigger issues” already in the public domain - e.g., access to college; accountability; admissions.

Note: This plan is dependent on external funding. But any campus may engage in a dialogue with its public constituents (trustees, donors, community and school leaders) on these topics.

Discussion Questions

Do you agree that a public campaign for liberal education is needed at this time?

On what key themes about undergraduate education today would you want such a campaign to focus? (see the issues noted above)

From your own experience, who would you recommend for involvement in such a campaign? (e.g., What specific individuals—connected with your campus, from business, public policy, community action, K-12 education—have you heard who might be effective spokespeople for such a campaign?)

In what specific ways might such a coalition help you on specific issues of concern on your campus or in your state or region?