

Ensuring Not Simply P-16 Alignment, but Truly Educated Students for the Twenty-First Century

By **Andrea Leskes**, vice president for education and quality initiatives, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Too many college graduates are found wanting in both their knowledge and intellectual skills for the constantly changing twenty-first-century world. In response, colleges and universities across the country have begun redesigning curricula while their faculty learn varied, effective new teaching strategies. Such innovations are aimed at raising the level of student achievement. So while P-12 struggles to prepare larger numbers of more diverse students for college, the image of that college study as held by pre-collegiate educators (and the relevant policymakers) may soon be outdated. Factual knowledge in traditional disciplines alone will not ready students for success if college increasingly stresses integration and the ability to apply knowledge to solving complex problems. As the expectations of college study change in response to workplace and societal demands, P-12 reform may be chasing a goal that is, in fact, receding into the past.

For those students entering college directly from high school (what has been considered the traditional-age college student), readiness for rigorous college-level study will depend largely on their primary and secondary education. It is this readiness that all the various P-16 initiatives basically address. In a comprehensive review of the situation, however, we must be mindful that higher education also serves large numbers of returning adult students; their readiness for college success requires approaches and solutions that are not part of P-16 initiatives. The continuing opportunities they will need to remedy educational gaps may make the goal of phasing out remedial work in college unrealistic.

Alignment of standards, as a policy in and of itself, will not necessarily raise expectations and accomplishment. It could just as

easily adjust them downward. To avoid this unfortunate result, alignment would ideally work backwards from the highest desired level of achievement—in this case the capacities, abilities, and knowledge of a college graduate. In its new report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, AAC&U defines this graduate as intentional about his or her learning. Such an intentional learner is empowered through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge from many fields, and responsible for personal and social values (see facing page for more details). If the goal of producing such graduates serves to guide P-16 alignment, it can create a powerful and relevant educational system. If not, it may fall far short of what individuals and the country really need.

The competence of college graduates directly impacts P-12 education; after all, tomorrow's schoolteachers are today's college students. The better college study becomes for all students—the more rigorous, coherent, integrated, and related to the needs of contemporary society—the better it becomes, too, for prospective teachers.

Students of education who experience varied and innovative teaching methods applied to many subjects will be more likely to emulate these methods in their own classrooms. Similarly, those who are often challenged through cooperative work with diverse groups will be better prepared for guiding diverse students toward success. Through repeated, authentic assessment of their college work, prospective teachers will internalize a commitment to continuous improvement that will find its way into primary and secondary classes. Of course, responsibility for such an enhanced undergraduate educa-

tion is not restricted to faculty members in schools or departments of education—the responsibility resides in the entire university faculty.

While standards are the centerpiece of much K-12 reform, the word can connote a “one-size-fits-all” approach to learning that fits poorly with U.S. diversity—diversity of individuals, of aspirations, of school and college missions, of institutional types. AAC&U urges high, clear, well-articulated, and aligned standards throughout educational levels, but also encourages multiple paths for their achievement. During the college years, too, no one curricular design—no single pathway—will suit all students and all disciplinary fields. However, agreed upon outcomes for learning and rubrics that explain the levels of expected accomplishment will enable students and teachers alike to gauge their success.

It is important that neither standards nor achievement be equated with courses completed or seat time. A focus on student capacities and their demonstration in appropriate ways will help shift education at all levels toward authentic assessment of content and skills mastered. Herein lies the real power of P-16 alignment for transformational change. Through P-16 projects, educators at all levels, together with external constituency groups, can discuss and agree on benchmarks. These benchmarks of achievement—knowledge, intellectual skills, perspectives, practical skills, affective behaviors—derived from and calibrated with the desired characteristics of a college graduate, will create purposeful pathways of learning. Such pathways will, in turn, assure individual students of personal success, and society of the employees and citizens needed for an increasingly complex, interdependent world. ■

The Learning Students Need for the Twenty-First Century

The highest level of student achievement for P-16 alignment—the gold standard—is that of a college graduate prepared to continue learning throughout a life lived now and in the future. Such an individual will need to adapt to new environments and integrate knowledge from various sources. But all parts of the educational system, from pre-school through the undergraduate years, must cooperate to develop such intentional learners. Sustained opportunities to gain and apply knowledge at successively more challenging levels will help ensure that education leads to this ultimate goal.

To thrive in a complex, interdependent, diverse, and constantly changing world, these **INTENTIONAL LEARNERS** must be:

- EMPOWERED** through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills
- INFORMED** by knowledge and forms of inquiry basic to many fields
- RESPONSIBLE** for their personal actions and for civic values.

The intellectual and practical skills that students need are extensive, sophisticated, and expanding with the explosion of new technologies. **EMPOWERED LEARNERS** excel at:

- effectively communicating orally, visually, in writing, and in a second language
- understanding and employing quantitative and qualitative analysis to solve problems
- interpreting and evaluating information from a variety of sources
- understanding and working within complex systems and with diverse groups
- demonstrating intellectual agility and the ability to manage change
- transforming information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action.

While intellectual and practical skills are essential, so is a comprehensive knowledge of the world students inherit, as human beings and as citizens. **INFORMED LEARNERS** understand well:

- the human imagination, expression, and the products of many cultures
- the interrelations within and among global and cross-cultural communities
- means of modeling the natural, social, and technical worlds
- the values and histories underlying U.S. democracy.

The integrity of a democratic society depends on citizens' sense of social responsibility and ethical judgment.

RESPONSIBLE LEARNERS manifest competency in and commitment to:

- intellectual honesty
- responsibility for society's moral health and for social justice
- active participation as a citizen of a diverse democracy
- discernment of the ethical consequences of decisions and actions
- deep understanding of one's self and respect for the complex identities of others, their histories, and their cultures.

Source: *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002)