

What is the best kind of college education

for today's students? This very basic question—and the many others that follow from it—has been provoked anew by transformative changes to the context within which higher learning takes place and for which graduates must be prepared.

What kind of learning do students need to meet emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world? To address this question—as well as questions about how colleges and universities can best advance a new vision for learning—AAC&U convened a national panel comprised of education, business, government, and community action leaders. Their emphatic answer, given in the specific context of American higher education, is a practical and engaged liberal education. Indeed, the panel's report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, released nearly two years ago, calls for a dramatic reorganization of higher education in America to give *all* students—regardless of institution or major—a liberal education.

Interestingly, education leaders the world over are reaching the same conclusion: the education that best prepares students for the challenges of the twenty-first century is a liberal education. In the winter 2003 issue of *Liberal Education*, Susan Gillespie points to “a burgeoning liberal education movement abroad” and observes that “new liberal education programs have emerged in countries as diverse as Belarus and Dubai, Estonia, Germany, and Hong Kong, Hungary and Kazakhstan, South Korea and Kyrgyzstan, Poland and Russia, Tajikistan and Turkey.”

A few years ago, the World Bank and UNESCO formed a joint Task Force on Higher Education and Society, bringing together education experts from thirteen countries to explore the future of higher education in the developing world. The Task Force's report, released in 2000, makes the case for liberal education at the university level in developing countries.

The increasingly widespread recognition of the practical value of a liberal education does not signal a

homogenization of global higher education, however. The actual practice of liberal education is distinctly local; it is largely determined by the questions raised—and the answers reached—in particular national, cultural, even institutional environments. What, for example, does it mean to be liberally educated? What kinds of curricula foster liberal learning? What is the role of the disciplines?

In the United States, the answers being worked out and explored by colleges and universities of all types are effectively reinventing liberal education. As Carol Geary Schneider, AAC&U's president, has observed recently, “the nation's campuses are dotted with a vibrant new generation of innovative programs and pedagogies. The majority of these innovations are indisputably reinventions of a more traditional liberal education for this new global era and for today's newly diverse population of students.” Collectively, these innovations indicate progress toward enacting the Greater Expectations vision of a new, globally engaged academy.

And it is not only globalization but also democratization that provokes so many of the questions to which liberal education is the answer. As Susan Gillespie notes, “many of the new liberal education programs are located in countries that are seeking to democratize their societies.” Why? As the joint World Bank and UNESCO Task Force puts it, the outcomes of a liberal education “are essential elements of effective participatory democracy.” Moreover, liberal education “foster[s] tolerance and ethical values, helping to encourage the social awareness and philanthropy that are vital to a society's health and stability.”

I can think of no better introduction to what follows. Indeed, in reading this issue of *Peer Review*, one is struck by how closely liberal education and democratic values are intertwined as well as by how appropriate, even necessary, both are to effective global engagement.—**DAVID TRITELLI**

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