

STRATEGIC PLAN 2013-17

Big Questions, Urgent Challenges:

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND
AMERICANS' GLOBAL FUTURE



Association
of American
Colleges and
Universities

The Strategic Plan in Brief—2013–17

Mission

The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education. (ADOPTED NOVEMBER 2012)

Goals

Guided by its mission, the LEAP Principles of Excellence, and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2), AAC&U will help the higher education community advance the following goals:

1. **LEAP: Liberal Education as a Global Necessity**

Build shared commitment to provide ALL college students with the high-quality learning they need to succeed and thrive in an era of global interconnection and rapid societal and economic change.

2. **QUALITY: 21st-Century Markers for the Value of US Degrees**

Promote a clear, contemporary, and capacious framework for high-quality learning and students' demonstrated achievement, providing an educationally meaningful compass to guide students' pathways to degrees.

3. **EQUITY: Innovation, Inclusive Excellence, and Student Success**

Accelerate broad-scale systemic innovation to advance educational practices that engage diversity and challenge inequities in order to make excellence inclusive.

4. **SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: Integrative Liberal Learning for the Global Commons**

Advance “big questions/global commons” inquiry and innovation across the liberal arts and sciences and through cornerstone-to-capstone designs for general education that foster civic learning, ethical reasoning, and engagement with US and global diversity.

Guiding Commitments

AAC&U champions a liberal and liberating education that engages all college students with big questions and real-world challenges, in both US and global contexts, and develops the capacities and the commitment to solve problems across difference.

Through the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, AAC&U has defined the aims of liberal education in terms of Principles of Excellence and a companion set of Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2). These provide shared reference points for the intended work across all parts of the strategic plan and for AAC&U's efforts to make excellence inclusive.

Areas of Work

AAC&U's efforts to advance each goal will be focused through the following areas of work:

- **Advocacy:** High-profile, proactive, and influential leadership
- **Action:** Direct support for campus-based work to advance faculty-led creativity, systemic change, and higher levels of student achievement
- **Alliances:** Partnerships—with faculty networks, selected state systems, and consortia—to significantly accelerate reforms that strengthen inclusion and quality
- **Authentic Assessment:** Resources, tools, frameworks, and evidence—to raise, document, and report students' cumulative gains from college

A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else. Yet this is what the postsecondary system, viewed as a whole, provides now. And this is what we must work together to change. . . . It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others.

—AAC&U Board of Directors¹

1. AAC&U, *The Quality Imperative: Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment with an Ambitious Vision for Learning; A Statement from the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2010), 3–6.

The LEAP Vision for Student Learning in College

Principles of Excellence²

Principle One	AIM HIGH—AND MAKE EXCELLENCE INCLUSIVE Make the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see below) a framework for the entire educational experience, connecting school, college, work, and life
Principle Two	GIVE STUDENTS A COMPASS Focus each student’s plan of study on achieving the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—and assess progress
Principle Three	TEACH THE ARTS OF INQUIRY AND INNOVATION Immerse all students in analysis, discovery, problem solving, and communication, beginning in school and advancing in college
Principle Four	ENGAGE THE BIG QUESTIONS Teach through the curriculum to far-reaching issues—contemporary and enduring—in science and society, cultures and values, global interdependence, the changing economy, and human dignity and freedom
Principle Five	CONNECT KNOWLEDGE WITH CHOICES AND ACTION Prepare students for citizenship and work through engaged and guided learning on “real-world” problems
Principle Six	FOSTER CIVIC, INTERCULTURAL, AND ETHICAL LEARNING Emphasize personal and social responsibility, in every field of study
Principle Seven	ASSESS STUDENTS’ ABILITY TO APPLY LEARNING TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS Use assessment to deepen learning and to establish a culture of shared purpose and continuous improvement

Essential Learning Outcomes³

Beginning in school and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts <p>Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring</p>
Intellectual and Practical Skills, including	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry and analysis • Critical and creative thinking • Written and oral communication • Quantitative literacy • Information literacy • Teamwork and problem solving <p>Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance</p>
Personal and Social Responsibility, including	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global • Intercultural knowledge and competence • Ethical reasoning and action • Foundations and skills for lifelong learning <p>Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges</p>
Integrative and Applied Learning, including	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies <p>Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems</p>

2. Reprinted from Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2007), 26. For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap.

3. Reprinted from AAC&U, *College Learning*, 12.

Context and Catalysts for the 2013–17 Strategic Plan

Toward a Second Century of Leadership

In 2015, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) will proudly celebrate its one hundredth year of leadership and service as a voice and force for liberal education. Founded in 1915 by presidents of liberal arts colleges, AAC&U now serves the entire educational community, including colleges and universities of all types—two-year and four-year, selective and broad access, research universities, comprehensive institutions, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges. Half of its members are private, and half are public. With nearly 1,300 member institutions and affiliated organizations, AAC&U has created a broad and inclusive meeting ground in which educators of all kinds—faculty, administrators, policy leaders, student life officials, and students themselves—work together to define and address their shared educational responsibilities, to learners and to society.

The overarching purpose of this association—affirmed in the newly revised mission statement (see p. 1)—is to help higher education provide a liberal and liberating education for all college students, including and especially students from groups historically underserved by the US educational system at all levels. Guided by this strategic plan, AAC&U’s centennial will showcase America’s stake in making educational excellence inclusive.

Liberal Education and America’s Promise

The goals outlined in this strategic plan for 2013–17 were developed through a broad dialogue with AAC&U members, with employers and civic leaders, and especially with those actively engaged in educational reform in higher education. With strong member support, the goals are framed within the context of AAC&U’s ongoing Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative. LEAP, launched in 2005 with AAC&U’s centennial in view, is a long-term effort to engage both higher education and significant publics with the value and power of liberal education—for individuals, for a globally connected democracy, and for an economy dependent on innovation and creativity.

Through LEAP, and in partnership with educators across all sectors of higher education, AAC&U has developed a twenty-first-century description of the broad learning and high-level capacities that characterize a liberally educated person. AAC&U also has developed Principles of Excellence that faculty and educational leaders can use to ensure that students demonstrably achieve the scope and level of learning they need. Together, the LEAP Principles of Excellence and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2) provide a guiding framework for AAC&U’s intended work from 2013 through 2017.

Big Questions, Urgent Challenges

Looking both to its centennial and to the global challenges Americans face in all spheres, AAC&U intends to focus with renewed intensity on the integral connections between the learning students acquire in college and their readiness to tackle “big questions,” both contemporary and enduring, and the “urgent challenges” that Americans face in a turbulent era of global interdependence, economic uncertainty, and disruptive innovation. AAC&U also will give high priority to the importance of providing a big-picture liberal education to the nation’s new majority students—those who come from less-advantaged backgrounds and who, therefore, most need the access to meaningful opportunity that a broad and rigorous education can provide.

Toward these ends, AAC&U will vigorously challenge the dividing lines within higher education that traditionally have steered students *either* to educational programs that prepare them for specific careers *or* to liberal arts programs that often are viewed as nonvocational. AAC&U’s intention is to ensure that all students develop *both* a rich understanding of the world they inherit—through studies in the humanities, arts, social sciences, and sciences—and the practical knowledge and capacities graduates need to help solve the difficult problems they will inevitably confront in the workplace, in their own lives, and as active participants in a diverse and globally engaged democracy.

In concert with its members and in ways that respect the priorities of specific fields of study, AAC&U will help educators apply the LEAP Principles of Excellence and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes to all postsecondary educational institutions and programs, including the fast-changing new frontiers in digital and online learning. Respecting the diversity and self-determination that have made American higher education a world leader, AAC&U will work to advance high standards for all programs and all students—including online programs and learners—while avoiding the constraining dangers of a reductive standardization.

A New Centrality for Liberal Education

In 2005, when AAC&U launched its long-term LEAP initiative to advance liberal education for all students, the association stood virtually alone as a voice for the American stake in the future strength of liberal learning. Yet, by 2005, the urgent need to build a public case for liberal education already was fully apparent. Higher education leaders had fallen largely silent on the subject of the learning students most need in the multiple spheres of life—personal, professional, civic, and global. Public policy and even some influential philanthropies were already far down the path of redefining college as career training, or, in the parlance of the day, “workforce development.” The historic connections between liberal education and the responsibilities of democratic self-governance seemed both blurred and largely forgotten. The word “liberal” itself was viewed as a term of opprobrium rather than an affirmation of the integral connection between freedom and the capacities cultivated through higher education.

As the president of AAC&U pointed out when LEAP was announced, reform movements of many kinds already were multiplying in higher education. But while virtually all these movements focused on needed changes in key aspects of liberal education—e.g., writing, research, collaborative inquiry, diversity and global studies, science reform, capstone projects, and the like—these movements seldom affirmed the root traditions of liberal or liberal arts education from which they had sprung.

Since 2005, the LEAP initiative has gained traction and momentum across all sectors of postsecondary education. Educators have come to see the value of the LEAP framework as a shared direction for the learning students need most and as a strategy for integrating the distinctive strengths of the liberal arts with the can-do vitality of professional and career fields. State systems have signed on as partners, proudly announcing their status as (or wish to become) “LEAP States.” The once separate reform movements now see their shared role as empirically validated “high-impact practices”⁴ that collectively help students achieve a liberal and liberating education.

AAC&U has further provided compelling evidence that employers both value the important outcomes that define liberal education and want educators to place stronger emphasis on helping students achieve them. Educators and employers are increasingly talking together about the connections between liberal education and the capacities basic to economic innovation and creativity. Employers have weighed in to support an increase in the use of high-impact practices and assessments that feature not standardized tests, but students’ own authentic work. Programs that blend the liberal arts with practical studies and real-world applications are rapidly expanding, to the benefit of graduates and the larger society.

Through this strategic plan for 2013–17, AAC&U will work to accelerate the pace, scale, and reach of these promising reforms across all parts of postsecondary education and for all students. AAC&U will further expand its productive partnership with employers as advocates and proponents of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes.

Liberal Education and the Indispensable Liberal Arts and Sciences

With faculty on hundreds of campuses already using their own locally crafted translations of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and the related LEAP VALUE rubrics for assessment,⁵ higher education is far better positioned today than it was, even a few years ago, to make the case for the value of broad liberal learning and to demonstrate, through innovative curricula and pedagogy, how that value can be realized by students who plan on careers in business, technology, health, entrepreneurial ventures, or education itself.

And yet, even as higher education has become more creative in advancing liberal education, the external dangers to the nation’s most powerful educational tradition have simultaneously been gaining, both in assertiveness and in policy influence. In the wake of worldwide economic contraction, policy and public discourses have become even more narrowly focused, with many public leaders directly attacking the supposed irrelevance of liberal arts majors—especially in the humanities and the arts—because they are less directly tied to specific jobs. Some elected leaders already are seeking to tie funding directly to a narrowly reductive concept of job training and placement.

4. Through the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has identified eleven teaching and learning practices that have been widely tested and shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. These “high-impact practices” take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts. For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm.

5. As part of AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project—itsself a part of the broader Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative—teams of faculty and other academic and student affairs professionals engaged in an iterative process over eighteen months wherein they gathered, analyzed, synthesized, and then drafted fifteen institutional-level rubrics (and related materials) based on the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes. The VALUE rubrics are available online at www.aacu.org/value/rubrics.

In response to the attacks on liberal arts disciplines, and at AAC&U members' strong urging, **this strategic plan gives special priority to the indispensable role of the liberal arts and sciences** in preparing students simultaneously for global engagement, economic opportunity, democratic responsibility, and personal fulfillment.

Through its 2010 merger with **Project Kaleidoscope**, a national organization devoted to advancing needed educational change in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), AAC&U already stands at the center of a fast-advancing national reform effort in STEM fields.⁶ Concurrently, through the formation of a new office of **Integrative Liberal Learning and the Global Commons** within the association, AAC&U will mount new efforts to remap general education, from first to final year, and to focus study in the liberal arts and sciences on “big questions” important to Americans' global future and on developing the intellectual and practical capacities basic to collaborative problem solving.

Science and the other STEM fields are important to Americans' global future. But rich learning about history, diverse cultures, languages and literatures, the creative and performing arts, philosophical traditions, religions, and political systems is equally fundamental to Americans' global future and success. The liberal arts and sciences are key components in America's ability to lead and innovate, in the global economy and in the long-term effort to expand human freedom. Both in general education and in work on arts and sciences majors, AAC&U will foreground ways of teaching these subjects—face-to-face, online, and in “real-world” contexts—that help students directly connect their liberal arts and sciences learning with challenging questions and issues, contemporary and enduring.

Multi-front Advocacy for Liberal Education AND the Liberal Arts

While working to strengthen the quality of liberal learning on campuses, AAC&U also welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with an expanding set of partners, both in strengthening the links between liberal learning and global acumen and in showcasing the connections between liberal education and economic opportunity.

Liberal education is broader than the liberal arts and sciences, as the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2) demonstrate. But no student can be well prepared, or even minimally prepared, for twenty-first-century realities unless he or she has achieved a strong grounding in the kinds of big-picture knowledge that the study of the liberal arts and sciences provides.

Where the association once seemed a solitary voice in its determined advocacy for liberal education, leaders from many associations and contexts now are speaking out with alarm about the damaging effects of policy disdain for and disinvestment in the broader forms of learning—especially in the humanities, the arts, and some of the social sciences—that are wellsprings of democratic vitality and essential to meeting American expectations of continued economic and democratic leadership in the world.

The ultimate goal of this strategic plan is to make liberal education a top priority and a demonstrated achievement for all students across all fields of study, including career, technical, and professional fields. Partnerships of many kinds will be indispensable to achieving this goal. In this spirit, AAC&U welcomes new allies in the cause of liberal and liberal arts education. The association pledges collaboration with anyone who is ready to join in the long-term national movement to make America's most powerful form of college learning a resource for all students and for the wider society.

It will take creative leadership to promote the value of liberal education across all fields of study, including career and technical fields, while simultaneously working to ensure the centrality of the liberal arts and sciences as a necessary component of liberal education for all. But the challenges of our world require nothing less. And those who have benefitted from a liberal education already are rising to that leadership responsibility. Guided by this strategic plan, AAC&U will work with its members and with partner organizations to catalyze the public will and the practical creativity needed to provide a liberal and liberating education for all college students, whatever their background and whatever their intended course of study.

Today's students, in all their variety, tie their hopes for a better future to the promise and value of high-quality learning in college. By making liberal education and the centrality of the arts and sciences a shared priority, educators and stakeholders can ensure that the promise will be kept.

6. In consultation with its advisory board, Project Kaleidoscope has developed a comprehensive strategic plan to advance STEM reform. The key strategies in the Project Kaleidoscope plan are aligned with the four goals of the AAC&U strategic plan, as noted recurrently below.

Pivotal Leverage Points

The goals outlined in this strategic plan were developed through a broad dialogue with AAC&U members, with employers and civic leaders, and especially with those actively engaged in educational reform in higher education. Without exception, participants sought ways to take emerging change “to the next level” and to accelerate dramatically the pace, scope, and demonstrated impact of broad-scale reform in liberal education.

Toward these ends, the plan is organized around the **four pivotal leverage points** described below. These leverage points, severally and together, have the potential to accelerate broad-scale systemic change across all parts of higher education—public and private, two-year and four-year, selective and broad access.

The leverage points are:

1. The Global Advantage of a Liberal and Liberating Education. In a world marked by global interdependence, turbulence, and problems that are both urgent and complex, there is an opportunity to build widespread recognition that the learning outcomes fostered by liberal education (see p. 2) have become more valuable to individuals and society than ever before, and therefore that liberal education should be reclaimed and repositioned as providing Americans with a comparative global advantage in preparing for work, citizenship, and lifelong learning.

2. The Need for 21st-Century Markers for the Quality of US Degrees. As concerns about quality increase, there is an opportunity to illuminate the kinds of learning students need for success in work, citizenship, global engagement, and lifelong learning as well as to promote the use of e-portfolios that show what students are learning and that provide more transparent forms of public accountability.

3. The Intense National Focus on Underserved Students and on Innovations and Interventions to Support their Success. With underserved students rapidly becoming the new majority in higher education, there is an opportunity and a responsibility to *integrate* AAC&U’s work on high-quality liberal learning and high-impact practices *with* innovations and systemic change initiatives intended to support higher levels of student attainment, especially in broad-access institutions and career-related programs.

4. The Potential Alignment of Now Separate—but High-Energy—Change Endeavors: Global Learning, Civic Learning, STEM Reform, Inquiry-Based Learning, and the Streamlining of General Education Requirements. Through its mission and strong existing ties with each of these educational change movements, AAC&U is well positioned to advance purposeful, integrative, and potentially transformative reforms that *draw from all these movements* in order to chart educational pathways that markedly strengthen students’ preparation for complex global challenges, civic responsibilities, and economic success.

Taken together, these leverage points address the meaning and value of college degrees and also advance evidence-based practices, innovations, and policies that can help students from underserved communities reap the long-term benefits—economic, civic, global, and personal—of college attainment. They further address the importance of engaging all students in US institutions with their responsibilities as citizens—US and global—and preparing them with the knowledge, skills, and experiences they will need in a complex and volatile world.

AAC&U's Four Goals and Key Strategies for Reaching Them

GOAL 1

LEAP: Liberal Education as a Global Necessity

Build shared commitment to provide ALL college students with the high-quality learning they need to succeed and thrive in an era of global interconnection and rapid societal and economic change.

AAC&U will mobilize widespread educator, employer, policy, and media recognition that—in a world marked by global integration, innovation, and turbulence—the hallmark learning outcomes of a liberal education have become more valuable than ever before, and therefore that liberal education should be prized as America's best educational choice and as the design for college learning that provides all students with a decisive comparative advantage in preparing for work, citizenship, global community, and life.

Strategies:

- Champion the LEAP Principles of Excellence and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2) as contemporary markers for the component elements of a high-quality liberal education, as frameworks to guide learning goals and curricular requirements, and as reference points for all aspects of AAC&U's strategic plan.
- Celebrate AAC&U's centennial with regional forums throughout the United States to showcase the importance of liberal education for the new global century and to publicize innovations—e.g., in science and career fields—that help students achieve liberal education outcomes that are valued economically and socially.
- Cultivate employers and other prominent leaders within and beyond higher education to make the global, economic, and civic case for liberal education.
- Engage concerns about the health of US democracy in order to foreground the connections between liberal education and the learning Americans need as citizens—US and global.
- Engage policy leaders with evidence about the global, economic, and civic value of liberal education and promote policy priorities that foster *both* greater attainment *and* demonstrated achievement of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes.

The quality of individuals' actual learning is the most important resource we have as a society. . . . In today's far more competitive global environment, we must work together toward standards that, once and for all, make excellence truly inclusive. . . . Quality must drive our commitment to college completion, both for the economy and for our future as a great democracy.

—AAC&U Board of Directors⁷

7. AAC&U, *The Quality Imperative*, 7.

GOAL 2

QUALITY: 21st-Century Markers for the Value of US Degrees

Promote a clear, contemporary, and capacious framework for high-quality learning and students' demonstrated achievement, providing an educationally meaningful compass to guide students' pathways to degrees.

AAC&U will play a leadership role—with campus, state, national, and international partners—in defining the goals, meaning, societal value, and quality indicators for college degrees in terms of the learning students need for success in work, citizenship, global engagement, and personal endeavors. AAC&U also will work with its members to create and promote shared digital frameworks through which campuses can assess and report students' cumulative achievement levels in relation to the intended liberal education outcomes.

Strategies:

- Promote the need for a widely shared degree framework—congruent with the LEAP Principles of Excellence and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—to clarify the important goals for college study in the twenty-first century and to guide program planning, student progress, and outcomes assessment.
- In concert with campuses, faculty, and other partner organizations, test, revise, and strengthen Lumina's Degree Qualifications Profile⁹ (DQP) as the recommended twenty-first-century degree framework for guiding students' achievement at successively higher degree levels: associate's, bachelor's, and beyond.
- With faculty, develop and disseminate—for campus and policy use—new assessment models and practices that make students' own work the primary source of evidence about college learning and achievement.
- With the leadership of Project Kaleidoscope, advance evidence-based, high-quality learning and assessment practices in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), and related fields.

The current focus on college-going . . . short-circuits the core issue of educational quality. Yet both employers and educators know that the quality shortfall is just as urgent as the attainment shortfall. . . . Employers want education to place significantly more emphasis on a set of outcomes . . . that range from writing to complex problem solving to ethical decision making, science and global learning, intercultural competence, and the ability to apply learning to real-world challenges.

—AAC&U Board of Directors⁸

8. AAC&U, *The Quality Imperative*, 1.

9. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) is a framework for quality assurance that offers a baseline set of reference points for what students in any field should learn, understand, and know at each degree level. A beta version of the DQP was released by Lumina Foundation in January 2011 and is currently being tested at postsecondary institutions across the United States. AAC&U's president is one of the DQP authors and AAC&U is a partner in this national experiment.

GOAL 3

EQUITY: Innovation, Inclusive Excellence, and Student Success

Accelerate broad-scale systemic innovation to advance educational practices that engage diversity and challenge inequities in order to make excellence inclusive.

AAC&U will work vigorously to develop and apply twenty-first-century markers for high-quality and public-spirited liberal education on behalf of all students, especially those from groups that have historically been underserved by the higher education system, and will promote systemic change and innovation—including digital innovation—in both selective and broad-access institutions to support underserved students' achievement of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes. AAC&U will proactively challenge “innovations” that provide narrow, incoherent, and/or routinized learning to underserved students who need and deserve a horizon-expanding liberal education. Addressing liberal education outcomes, AAC&U will emphasize the success of the racial and ethnic populations whose success is crucial to America's future.

Strategies:

- Promote principles, practices, and partnerships for student success that make quality of learning the guiding standard for innovation, affordability, and productivity; advance innovative designs for college study—e.g., in STEM fields—that integrate career preparation with students' achievement of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes.
- In collaboration with faculty, administrators, and student affairs educators, develop programs and pathways for student success that blend promising practices to foster achievement of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and to support increased levels of completion.
- Expand collaborative practice across boundaries—focused on student and faculty success—and foster systemic collaborations to enhance the quality of underserved student achievement.
- Advance policy and build capacity to effect institutional transformation as the way to make excellence inclusive. Engage faculty—full-time, part-time, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track faculty—in pursuing goals and using practices that support both meanings of student success: expanded completion levels and demonstrated achievement of the expected liberal learning outcomes students need for success in the twenty-first century.

The time is right and the need is urgent to provide a horizon-expanding education to all who participate in our educational system—in school, in community college and career-technical institutions, and in four-year colleges and universities, public and private. Access to educational excellence is the equity challenge of our time.

—AAC&U Board of Directors¹⁰

10. AAC&U, *The Quality Imperative*, 6.

GOAL 4

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: Integrative Liberal Learning for the Global Commons

Advance “big questions/global commons” inquiry and innovation across the liberal arts and sciences and through cornerstone-to-capstone designs for general education that foster civic learning, ethical reasoning, and engagement with US and global diversity.

AAC&U will promote innovative designs for college learning that richly address *all* students’ preparation for civic, ethical, and social responsibility in US and global contexts characterized by diversity, complexity, deep inequalities, and worldwide movements for self-determination and justice. AAC&U will advance this work in concert with the Goal 3 emphasis on equity, inclusive excellence, and underserved student success.

Strategies:

- Collaborate to make civic inquiry, social responsibility, and democratic engagement across differences—in local and global contexts—a shared expectation for *all* college students, *all* areas of study, and *all* forms of postsecondary education.
- Promote a cornerstone-to-capstone remapping of general education programs and pathways throughout US higher education in order to foster intellectual rigor, global competence, social responsibility, and cumulative integrative learning for *all* college students.
- Catalyze innovations that advance cross-disciplinary inquiry, research, and learning—using digital tools and hands-on approaches—across the liberal arts and sciences.
- With Project Kaleidoscope faculty and leaders, advance state-of-the-art pedagogical practices in STEM learning, for both general education and majors, and monitor institutional progress in making engaged inquiry practices the norm for all STEM learners, in general education and major programs.

As we commit to the importance of college learning for all Americans, we also should commit to civic, ethical, and cross-cultural learning as priorities for every degree program and every student. Anything less will leave too many Americans seriously underprepared for their responsibilities to our democracy, to this nation’s global leadership, and—yes—to the civic, ethical, and diversity challenges that are basic to work in the twenty-first century.

—AAC&U Board of Directors¹¹

11. AAC&U, *The Quality Imperative*, 3.

Environmental Context

AAC&U's strategic priorities build on the association's long history of leadership for liberal education, but they also take into account the changing educational and policy environment. Presented below are some of the most salient features of that environment that are likely to affect AAC&U's work in the coming years.

Broad Trends in Higher Education

- **Innovation, “scaling,” and far-reaching systemic change**—intended to create new efficiencies in cost while dramatically increasing degree attainment and college “success”—have become urgent priorities across all arenas in which educational change is discussed. Some proposals for systemic change are aligned with AAC&U's current work. Other proposals move in a different direction, most notably the drive toward “delivering” learning in formats that accelerate the fragmentation of the student's educational experience.
- **Quality** is emerging as a **prominent policy concern** in the national effort to increase degree attainment dramatically, but **quality is still “trumped”** by the emphatic focus on accelerating degree **completion**. The quality agenda needs to be aligned with the mounting sense of urgency about increasing productivity, supporting underserved student success, and reducing the cost of college. The Degree Qualifications Profile,¹² (DQP) now being beta tested by Lumina Foundation through a series of significant grants, is eliciting both enthusiasm and concern across higher education. There is enthusiasm for the broad dimensions of the profile and for its emphasis on intentional and integrative learning (two major AAC&U priorities).
- **Innovations designed to introduce efficiencies into higher education institutions or systems also are being introduced in the context of the swirl** in student enrollment patterns. AAC&U is uniquely positioned to make the case that the postsecondary system as a whole would be more effective and efficient if Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2) were emphasized by all campuses, for all students, across progressively higher levels of learning. Yet many in higher education are concerned that any shared framework for high-quality student learning may undermine institutional autonomy.
- **Thought leaders are beginning to discuss whether students are learning enough in college.** The abundant evidence of a shortfall has not yet been connected to the continuing decrease in public financial support for higher education, however, and the discussion is happening in a context of increased public skepticism about the general value of a college degree.
- There is a **search for new forms of accountability**, but the **standardized testing mindset** is still so pervasive that policy makers and members of the general public almost reflexively identify “assessment” with tests, such as the SAT or GRE, that report findings parsimoniously with a few numbers. There is an urgent need to develop ways of reporting assessment findings based on student work that match test scores in perceived transparency and significance.
- The **Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) places a strong emphasis on assessing students' authentic work.** There is an opportunity, through AAC&U's work both on LEAP and on the DQP, to advance a “sea change” across higher education in what counts as meaningful evidence by giving primacy to students' demonstrated accomplishments across the curriculum and by reducing the role of the standardized test.
- The **continued increase in contingent faculty appointments is an “elephant in the room”** for American higher education, threatening the future of scholarly community and putting at grave risk AAC&U's commitment to high-quality liberal education and inclusive excellence for **all**. The strength of American higher education in the last century came from the integration of scholarship and teaching. That integration is central to one of the core goals of liberal education: teaching students the arts of evidence-based inquiry, analysis, and judgment. The link between teaching and research has been cut almost completely by the so-called “new providers” that many in policy and philanthropy see as models for efficiencies in “cost” and “delivery.” Even in the not-for-profit sector, the majority of teaching is now done by non-tenure-line faculty and/or graduate students.

12. See note 9 above.

- AAC&U’s publication of research on **“high-impact practices”**¹³ has elicited widespread engagement and interest. Institutions are seeking better tools for tracking the extent of students’ participation in high-impact practices. There also is keen interest in expanded research on **the benefits of high-impact practices for underserved students**.
- There is equal enthusiasm for AAC&U’s work on **authentic assessment—using the LEAP VALUE rubrics,¹⁴ portfolios, and student work**—and recognition that students engaged in high-impact practices are, by definition, producing work that can be sampled for assessment purposes.
- As the systemic reform of American higher education advances, AAC&U is well positioned by its mission and history to provide **credible, faculty-friendly, national leadership regarding the aims, outcomes, practices, and forms of assessment that can be used to strengthen and demonstrate educational quality**.

Broad Trends in Liberal Education

- Many of the broader changes AAC&U seeks to advance can be effectively illustrated in the context of **STEM teaching and learning**—an arena that is widely seen as crucial to Americans’ future. There is an **opportunity to make STEM a demonstration site for the revitalization of liberal education**. AAC&U’s Project Kaleidoscope is well positioned to advance its strategic goal of graduating more liberally educated STEM graduates and more STEM-literate liberally educated citizens in light of this opportunity.
- **The assault on/dismissal of the humanities and many of the social sciences continues apace in many sectors**. AAC&U’s own research shows widespread confusion about what is included among “the liberal arts” and, simultaneously, a strong public conviction that these fields are not useful.
- **While many in higher education have been working to strengthen students’ global knowledge, this goal is not yet a policy priority**. Global learning has been left to a later day in school reform, and despite the constant invocation of the United States’ desire to remain a “global leader,” there is no discernible policy effort to add global knowledge and engagement to national accountability frameworks for higher education. National leadership is needed to determine the **meaning and content of global knowledge and competence and to foreground the role of the humanities, arts, and social sciences in developing global acumen**.
- It also remains a challenge to make the case for **civic learning and democratic engagement as essential rather than optional** in postsecondary education. Helping students develop their global knowledge through engagement with issues that ultimately affect the public good may help build policy and public support for civic learning as an expected component of college study.
- Many higher education leaders who want to **renew higher education’s commitment to civic learning** (US and global) believe this renewal needs to be tied to the new national emphasis on increased student success. They ask, in other words, **will civic learning increase persistence and promote employability?** Mindful citizenship has become harder to defend as a core educational purpose in its own right. However, employers increasingly view **civic engagement and social responsibility** as important factors in selecting, developing, and evaluating business leaders.
- **General education is now caught in the cross fire that attends efforts to accelerate degree “production,”** reduce costs, and improve quality. Each of AAC&U’s educational priorities requires a coherent and vibrant general education, and general education remains a necessary if not sufficient component of any robust liberal education. There is an opportunity to revitalize general education as the public face of liberal education by linking it directly to the global, civic, and equity challenges all college graduates will confront.
- Although AAC&U actively promotes vertical, thematic, and integrative designs for general education that involve upper- as well as lower-division studies, there is a growing policy effort to standardize **general education across two- and four-year public institutions by reducing the scope of the program so that required hours will be similar at both types of institution**. Moreover, a growing fraction of general education now is provided prior to college entrance. In sum, general education requirements are being reduced, while growing parts of the general education curriculum are being assigned to high schools.

13. See note 4 above.

14. See note 5 above.

- Efforts to limit general education notwithstanding, AAC&U surveys and meeting enrollments demonstrate that **hundreds of AAC&U members are working actively to strengthen general education** and to make it more purposeful, public-spirited, and integrative. These members seek AAC&U’s assistance in advancing and supporting their work.
- The entities experimenting with **Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)** have turned their attention to the **general education curriculum** and to finding less expensive ways to help move underserved students through their required courses. But many MOOCs are designed with low-level tests, online tutorials, and no research or writing assignments and, therefore, are unlikely to contribute to students’ development of high-level capacities for inquiry, analysis, and the use of evidence to reach conclusions. Moreover, the design of many MOOCs is not based on research about “what works” to support college success for underserved students.
- The spirit and details of the **Common Core State Standards** initiative¹⁵ are highly congruent with AAC&U’s work on the practices that foster liberal education. The standards urge that students work early and often on **evidence-based analysis, research, and writing** during the school years. AAC&U’s future work on curriculum and pedagogy should align with these intended standards.
- The **LEAP Presidents’ Trust**¹⁶ is becoming both visible and vocal, as presidents who have joined it—and others influenced by them—promote the economic, civic, global, and personal benefits of liberal education through their own speeches, editorials, nationally visible blogs, and well-publicized campus-hosted conferences. The Trust is poised to become a leadership resource for AAC&U’s next generation of work to revitalize liberal education and promote its value.
- The higher education community values AAC&U’s work on **employer endorsement of the outcomes associated with liberal education** and wants AAC&U to expand that work significantly. Members of the LEAP Presidents’ Trust are prepared to take a leadership role in AAC&U’s future work with employers.
- As AAC&U prepares to celebrate its **centennial**, there is every incentive for the association to become even more proactive in advocating for the value of liberal education, in forming research partnerships focused on practices that help students achieve a liberal education, and in fostering new creativity on campus to ensure a vibrant and inclusive future for the nation’s signature educational tradition.

15. Sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards initiative seeks to align state K-12 curricula through the adoption of clearly defined standards for student learning. The standards define the knowledge and skills that high school graduates need to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.

16. The LEAP Presidents’ Trust is a leadership group within the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative that consists of presidents from all sectors of higher education. Trust members engage with campus and key external stakeholders about the core purposes and practices of liberal education, and provide leadership for advancing reforms in the practice of liberal education both on campus and with other groups and organizations with which they are affiliated. For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust.

Toward Inclusive Excellence Through Liberal Education

Liberal education has long been recognized as the nation’s—and arguably, the world’s—premier educational tradition, the kind of learning requisite for leadership both in the economy and in democratic society. But until recently, only a small fraction of Americans completed college, and liberal education has been a resource mainly for the fortunate.

In the twenty-first century, however, postsecondary education is becoming the new portal to economic opportunity for US students. In this dramatically altered society, AAC&U’s goal is to ensure that all college students—and the society that depends on their talents—reap the full benefits of a liberal and liberating education. As AAC&U’s mission statement proclaims, liberal education and inclusive excellence—together—need to become the foundations for institutional purpose and educational practice across all parts of postsecondary learning.

With the Principles of Excellence and the Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2) as a guiding compass, AAC&U will work tirelessly to resist the development of a two-tiered educational system in which some students receive a world-class education while others experience narrower and more limiting forms of training. The transformative change intended is captured in the chart below, which is adapted from the LEAP report, *College Learning for a New Global Century* (AAC&U, 2007).¹⁷

	LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY	LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
WHAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an elite curriculum • nonvocational • intellectual and personal development • an option for the fortunate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a necessity for <i>all</i> students • essential for success in a global economy and for informed citizenship, US and global • intellectual, civic, personal, and professional development
HOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • through studies in arts and sciences disciplines (“the major”) and/or through general education in the initial years of college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • through studies that emphasize the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see p. 2) in general education and across the entire educational continuum and <i>all</i> fields of study—from school through college—at progressively higher levels of achievement
WHERE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • liberal arts colleges or colleges of arts and sciences in larger institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities, as well as across all fields of study

17. Adapted from AAC&U, *College Learning*, 18, fig. 5.

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ABOUT AAC&U

AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises nearly 1300 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size. AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.



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