

A History of AAC&U's Work over Three Decisive Decades

(1982–2016)

IT HAS BEEN A PRIVILEGE both to write this history of the work and educational leadership of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) over three decades and to have participated, after 1987, in the work it explores.

I describe the period covered in this study—1982 to 2016—as “three decisive decades.” What made them decisive?

During these decades, the Association of American Colleges (AAC), which became the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in 1995, committed itself to two far-reaching transformations. The first was a reconceptualization of the meaning and purposes of liberal education in US higher education. AAC had long styled itself as the “voice for liberal learning.” But in 1985, decisively and persistently, AAC/AAC&U rejected earlier twentieth-century ideas about what liberal education includes and the kinds of learning needed to help students achieve it.

Previously, AAC, in company with most educators, had identified liberal education with studies in specific disciplines—the so-called “liberal arts and sciences”—and with the colleges in which these subjects were taught. In 1985, however, AAC began to identify liberal education with “ways of knowing” that could and should be cultivated across all fields of study, including career fields.¹

That decision was made before I joined the AAC staff as its sole vice president in 1987. But I knew its significance and, with my new AAC colleagues, intentionally tried to build on this more inclusive approach to the purposes and practice of liberal education.

In Part One of this history, I do my best to tell the story of how AAC/AAC&U embarked on its revisionist path, and of the many different scholars and leaders who contributed to the resulting reconceptualization of liberal education.

The second transformation was a reinvention of AAC/AAC&U itself—who belonged to the association, how the organization worked with others,

and the effort to advance, with a very small budget, a very large agenda for systemic change to make the practice of liberal education more empowering, more practical, and more inclusive. I recount that history in Parts Two, Three, and Four.

A key component of the reinvention of how AAC&U worked—and with whom—was the creation of the LEAP campaign: Liberal Education and America’s Promise. LEAP, which began in 2005, during my presidency, was initially described as a ten-year, multifront effort to advance liberal education as a priority for *all* college students as well as the wider society, and to promote far-reaching changes in the practice of undergraduate education so that college students would more reliably achieve such “essential” capacities as critical and creative thinking, teamwork and problem solving, intercultural knowledge and competence, and integrative learning. Through this campaign, AAC&U forcefully argued that it was time to break free of the dividing line that had long separated career and professional studies from “true” liberal learning. Simultaneously, the association threw the entirety of its energies into reforms that would make educational excellence—our synonym for liberal learning—*inclusive* rather than *exclusive*.

I don’t remember being terrified when we announced this campaign, but in writing this history, I realized that I should have been.

We pledged ten years of work on the LEAP initiative—culminating in the 2015 Centennial Year—but we had in hand less than half a million dollars in short-term grant support at the time of the launch for an ambitious campaign. And yet, high risk aside, the long-term commitment the AAC&U board of directors made to LEAP was critical to the association’s subsequent growth both in influence and in inclusiveness.

Working together with a host of amazing external advisors and the board of directors, my colleagues and I developed a clear public advocacy, campus action, and authentic evidence agenda for LEAP. Once we did, we tied almost all of AAC&U’s three-year (or even shorter) grant-funded projects and AAC&U’s continuing programs (conferences, institutes, web resources, publications, etc.) to that larger vision for “making excellence inclusive.” We wanted a North Star to guide and integrate the different parts of AAC&U’s work, and, working together, we found it.

By the fourth year of the LEAP campaign, LEAP and AAC&U “took off”—winning allies and influence far beyond anything my colleagues and I imagined when we first brought the LEAP idea to the AAC&U board of directors in 2004.

Today, as I work “in the field” on Lumina-funded educational change initiatives, I am constantly discovering how many faculty and educational leaders are actively using different aspects of work first initiated through LEAP.

But their struggles to advance equity-minded² change in undergraduate learning also tell me how much more remains to be done to fulfill the vision of making educational excellence inclusive rather than exclusive.

The “Big Ideas” behind AAC&U’s Work since 1982

To my mind, three big driving ideas were behind the long-term period of AAC/AAC&U’s transformative reinvention, which began in 1982 and accelerated with LEAP.

The first was the decision that AAC/AAC&U would work to break down the hallowed dividing lines between a “true” liberal arts education and the career-related fields. Beginning in the 1980s, AAC embarked on a radical effort to bring the liberal arts and career fields together around a shared commitment to developing capacities—now called learning outcomes—that would be “essential” in the world beyond college. LEAP built on that effort. It did not initiate it.

The second was the decision to help liberal learning—in all fields of study—become integrally connected with the wider world. AAC&U’s signature role in helping higher education develop the concept of high-impact practices, or HIPs, was part of a much larger and longer-term effort to foster students’ readiness to connect their academic learning with the needs of the wider society, both civic and economic. In doing so, AAC&U signaled the significance of these practices and helped turn disparate reforms into a juggernaut movement.

We who have benefited from the transformative power of a good liberal education all know its importance in our own lives. But private benefit is not enough. If liberal education is to thrive as higher education’s preferred educational pathway, educators need to be able to show that a broadly educated citizen—or engineer, nurse, social service worker, entrepreneur, or accountant—brings discernible value to society, both as an individual and in the economy. And so, since the 1990s, AAC/AAC&U leaders have vigorously promoted forms of liberal learning that involve students directly both with real-world challenges and with off-campus sites for learning. The general idea has been that students, while in college, should have ample opportunities to *apply* their learning to consequential questions and to *reflect* with others on the learning that should result from their experiences.

The third strand in this transformative reinvention was AAC&U’s expansion of its mission to combine liberal education with inclusive excellence and equity. AAC&U declared its concern, not just with “what is taught” but with who is benefiting. It became the leading national organization (and, I often worry, is still the only leading national association) working to braid quality learning and

equity together. As AAC&U President Lynn Pasquerella and current association staff know well, that work is urgently needed now more than ever.

Roots and Branches

The story I tell in these pages about these three big ideas begins well before I came to 1818 R Street in 1987.

AAC/AAC&U's transformative reinvention began with the tenure of President Mark Curtis, who became AAC's president in 1978. Curtis wanted to revitalize the way students learned in the liberal arts and sciences, as his speeches from the 1970s make clear. He set in motion the work that led to the publication of AAC/AAC&U's landmark 1985 report, *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community*. *Integrity* vigorously decried the chaotic incoherence of the undergraduate college curriculum and proposed a comprehensive set of reforms to make college learning more purposeful and empowering. Curtis's successor, John Chandler, who came to AAC in 1985, made *Integrity* the internal "to-do" list for a host of ambitious change initiatives. Chandler's successor, Paula Brownlee, who became president in 1991, helped move AAC&U in important new directions, which I describe in this history. But she, too, regarded *Integrity* as a foundational source for AAC's work on educational change. And I argue in these pages that *Integrity*'s emphasis on "inquiry learning" influences AAC&U's work on liberal learning to this day.

I first learned about the *Integrity* report, not when its scathing indictment of current practice in undergraduate education was covered on the front page of the *New York Times* in 1985, but very accidentally. As an administrator at the University of Chicago, I went to visit one of my Chicago mentors, Jonathan Z. Smith, a member of the select committee that shaped *Integrity* and one of its contributing authors. A brilliant scholar, dean of the college, and a notoriously severe intellectual critic, Smith was reading a paper in manuscript when I arrived in his office one day in 1984.

"This is not bad," he said, nodding his head toward the document with bemused approval. "Not bad. Better than I expected, frankly."

And then (I am paraphrasing), he went on to tell me with satisfaction, "We're going to attack the stupid barriers between liberal arts and vocational learning. Break down the silos. That woman at George Washington University [Linda B. Salamon, dean of arts and sciences, and a member of the select committee shaping the report] talked us into it."

Until that day, I had never heard of AAC. But Smith's approval—never easily given—won my interest.

I especially wanted to know more about the “liberal arts/vocational studies” realignment. Before coming to the University of Chicago, I had worked extensively with adult learners who routinely chose career-related majors and considered their general education requirements an irrelevant annoyance. I was keenly interested in the question of how students in career fields could reap the benefits I had gained from my own liberal arts education.

So I went to the AAC annual meeting in 1985. It was a sea of tweed-jacketed, gray-haired men with some women and a few people of color. (Today AAC&U looks much more like America.) But the sessions and small group discussions about the report were exciting and introduced me to a community earnestly concerned with what a college degree ought to mean.

During that period, I was running University of Chicago programs for faculty across the country: the Midwest Faculty Seminar and the Chicago Institutes on Teaching and Learning. Very soon, I found that sessions for those events were suddenly full of references to *Integrity’s* recommendations. It appeared that campus faculty and administrators were actively putting *Integrity’s* reform agenda into play.

For the first time, I discovered the way associations can, if they choose, help “authorize” educational change by providing “blue ribbon” recommendations about solving significant educational problems.

To be sure, associations can make good recommendations only when they can secure wise guidance from their member institutions and other knowledgeable stakeholders—research scholars, thoughtful employers, engaged civic leaders, campus-based faculty and leaders, trustees and regents, and students and graduates themselves.

Beginning with *Integrity*, and ever since, AAC/AAC&U has been blessed with exactly that kind of wise guidance. Collectively, these advisors have helped shape the AAC&U “vision” for liberal education—purposeful, public-spirited, inclusive, active, and practical.

The Sources, Voice, and Limitations of This History

In these pages, I track the development of AAC&U’s “vision” through two primary sources: (1) major initiatives and signature reports that AAC/AAC&U has shaped since 1982, and (2) board-endorsed positions, both official board statements and AAC&U’s periodic strategic plans, which also were developed with and approved by the AAC&U board of directors. I also cite some documents that were in my own records.

I have written this report in the third-person voice, even though, after 1987, I had a role in most of the work described, and after 1998, as president, I was officially responsible for it.

I chose the third-person voice in part because this is not a memoir and in part because the real keys to AAC&U's success in these three decisive decades were its active, can-do institutional members and a very talented staff, committed to learning from and with AAC&U's most change-minded members. The work reported here was a collective accomplishment.

As with *Integrity*, where the select committee that shaped the report went way beyond anything AAC President Mark Curtis initially had in mind,³ AAC&U has been blessed again and again by creative groups—task forces, national panels and councils, working groups, etc.—that took the opportunity of an AAC/AAC&U invitation to help the association's leaders both reconfigure and enlarge their previous thinking. You will find reports on such advisor-led developments in all the chapters of this history.

At the same time, even though this is a history and not a memoir, the interpretations in these pages have been filtered through my own recollections and understanding of AAC/AAC&U's priorities. If someone else had written this study, the interpretative narrative would almost certainly be very different.

I am painfully conscious of how much I have had to omit.

You, the reader, are likely saying: "Two hundred and eight pages? Could you cut it to ten?"⁴

But my former colleagues, as they leaf through these pages, are going to notice how much was left out. Unforgivably left out, they are bound to say.

And I apologize to them for those omissions. During my presidency, at any given time, AAC&U was running at least a dozen grant-funded projects, and by the Centennial era, as many as two dozen grant-funded initiatives in any calendar year. Each of those projects did significant work, and I can examine only a small fraction of them in these pages. As a former AAC/AAC&U vice president who once designed and led such endeavors, I anticipate my colleagues' unhappiness with all the omissions, and I share their regret.

AAC&U's Talented Staff

So, too, in these pages, only a few of my former colleagues could be given something like their just due for their inspiring contributions to AAC&U's transformative change over the past three decades. I did try hard, however, to record how critical AAC&U staff members' collective talent and commitment have been to AAC&U's growth, effectiveness, and influence.

To amend an adage from AAC&U member president Elaine P. Maimon, “a presidential vision without a colleague-shared strategy is a fantasy.”⁵

AAC&U gained impact and standing because its staff helped build a shared direction for our work and then pulled together, creatively and tirelessly, to both advance that shared direction and to discern from these efforts what higher education needed next from AAC&U’s leadership.

As I wrote in a Centennial message for AAC&U, our member institutions are the vibrant heart of this association. Their vitality is foundational to the kind of learning that AAC&U promotes. But it takes constant care and creativity to build a community of shared purpose across all the diverse sectors in US higher education. AAC&U’s staff has been and remains the catalyst for building community from diversity. It was a joy and an honor to be part of their work.

Acknowledgments

I miss many things from my days at AAC&U. But I especially miss my friends, the brilliant editors—starting with my chief of staff and executive assistant, and extending through all the strengths, both intellectual and editorial, in the Office of Communications and Public Affairs. I found almost no errors in the many AAC/AAC&U publications and board papers I reviewed for this history. That is my colleagues’ achievement, not mine.

In this context, it is my pleasure to acknowledge and warmly thank the many members of AAC&U’s current staff who helped prepare this work for publication. David Tritelli, who was the ideal editor for much of what I wrote as president of AAC&U, read an early version of this manuscript and provided incisive guidance at critical points. Emily Schuster has been invaluable as an editor, clarifying concepts and bringing a meticulous eye to each successive draft. Amy Davis did what can only be appreciatively described as heroic work with the notes and copy editing. Michele Stinson skillfully managed production, and Liz Clark, a trusted partner during my entire time as president of AAC&U, created yet another wonderful design.

I also thank the many other current or recent AAC&U colleagues who reviewed the manuscript prior to publication, offering helpful suggestions and corrections: Ashley Finley, Kelly Mack, Tia Brown McNair, Caryn McTighe Musil, Lynn Pasquerella, Terry Rhodes, and C. Edward Watson. Each was a principal player in the work I’ve sought to describe, and I am grateful to them all. (And any errors that remain are my own responsibility.)

I give special thanks as well to Donald Harward, former president of Bates College and founder of Bringing Theory to Practice, who helped conceive

and secure funding for the LEAP initiative. From 2005 on, he constantly pressed me to think harder and work harder for a cause we both believed in. He read Part One at an early stage and offered wise guidance on different aspects of the analysis. Daniel Sullivan, another LEAP “founder,” assisted the work described in these pages in countless ways, not least by compiling the history of AAC&U’s fundraising from 2005 to 2016.

Thanks are due as well to my long-term colleague, Jerry Gaff, who generously shared his recollections concerning AAC’s work during the pivotal 1980s and who did so much himself in subsequent decades to advance the association’s work with faculty, general education, curriculum reform, assessment, and more. Gaff has written his own essay on the period I cover, titled *The History of Faculty in AAC&U: A Personal Essay*. His narrative examines many aspects of AAC/AAC&U’s institutional development that I have mentioned only briefly or not at all in this history of AAC&U’s evolving approach to liberal learning and educational reform. Our two projects are usefully complementary.

My debts to scholars and educational reforms across the United States are immense. This entire history is a record of thoughtful educators’ collective influence on AAC/AAC&U’s efforts to make liberal education inclusive rather than exclusionary, both in principle and, crucially, in practice. Your work with students was a constant source of inspiration.

Finally, I express my thanks to all the philanthropic organizations, private and public, as well as the individual donors, who supported AAC/AAC&U’s work across the decades covered in these pages. The confidence you expressed in the organization and your conviction that AAC&U plays an indispensable role in the higher education landscape have provided necessary resources for much of the work described here. Foundations have the special luxury in US society of “taking the long view” and “illuminating the big picture.” As I have tried to show, AAC/AAC&U’s work—supported by philanthropy and informed by countless scholars and scholar-practitioners—has helped elicit that much-needed “big picture” description of the kinds of learning today’s graduates need from college.

A final note: This book was written before the pandemic upended all of higher education, forcing virtually every leader, faculty member, and administrator to make hard choices about the immediate future. But if anything, today’s compounding crises—of health, racial disparity, and democracy itself—only underscore the core argument of this book: that in a tumultuous world, Americans need more—and more powerful—liberal learning, not less.

The whole point of a liberal education is to prepare our graduates to grapple with complexity, by evaluating evidence, engaging views different from their own, and considering long-term consequences as well as near-term practicalities.

Making that kind of excellence fully inclusive remains more an aspiration in US higher education than a demonstrated achievement.

I hope the work described in these pages will help educators keep that inclusive excellence aspiration centrally in view as their own North Star for a fast-moving future.

With warm thanks to everyone who helped build AAC&U's legacy of leadership.

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June 2021