



# New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability

A STATEMENT  
OF PRINCIPLES,  
COMMITMENTS  
TO ACTION

ASSOCIATION OF  
AMERICAN COLLEGES  
& UNIVERSITIES

COUNCIL FOR  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
ACCREDITATION



With support from the Teagle Foundation, *New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability: A Statement of Principles, Commitments to Action* was developed jointly by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in dialogue with many colleagues, including leaders in the nation's major higher education and accreditation associations. It has been printed for use in higher education meetings. AAC&U and CHEA encourage its wide dissemination, look forward to vigorous debate in many settings, and to the implementation of its recommendations.

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# New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability

A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES, COMMITMENTS TO ACTION

## PREFACE

The United States has been exceptionally well served by its varied, accessible, and intellectually self-directed colleges and universities. Our tradition of intellectual freedom and institutional diversity has made the American system of higher education the envy of the world.

The higher education community is determined to maintain this leadership.

We face some formidable challenges. Other nations have surpassed the United States in terms of the percentages of their populations achieving postsecondary degrees. Our levels of attainment have remained static, primarily because college access and degree completion rates are still sharply stratified by income and ethnicity. As the demographic composition of our society continues to change rapidly, we must reverse these inherited inequities. Moreover, most Americans will need education beyond high school to prosper economically. The world is demanding more of college graduates than ever before, but students' levels of achievement are not increasing accordingly.

Finally, and perhaps most important, higher education has an obligation to our democracy as well as our economy. A college degree should ensure that graduates are well prepared to contribute to society as knowledgeable, engaged, and active citizens.

In order to meet these challenges, we in the higher education community must continually seek, and find, better ways to reach our common goal of helping all the students we serve realize their full potential. We need to make clear, for ourselves and our various constituencies, what our aims are, how we seek to achieve them, and how well we do so. This requires continuing efforts in many quarters—to make higher education a challenging and rigorous experience for all students—for their benefit and society's as well. To do so, we in higher education must constantly monitor the quality of student learning and development, and use the results both to improve achievement and to demonstrate the value of our work to the public. We must not settle for anything less.

As leaders of organizations representing over three thousand colleges and universities, we commit ourselves to work together—with our member institutions and other higher education organizations—to implement the following principles and actions for meaningful educational accountability.

## PRINCIPLES

**1** The primary responsibility for achieving excellence falls on colleges and universities themselves. Accrediting organizations have played a significant role in advancing the assessment of learning outcomes and must continue to do so while encouraging institutions to set the highest possible standards. Philanthropic organizations, scholarly and professional associations, honorary societies, and others concerned with higher education also have a responsibility to encourage, indeed to insist upon, systematic improvement. Governments, state and federal, and governing boards also share the responsibility to support the drive for high standards and continuous improvement in higher education. Within this context of shared responsibility, however, colleges and universities must themselves take the lead in seeing that American higher education maintains its position of global leadership.

**2** To that end, each college and university (and major divisions, schools, and programs within them) should develop ambitious, specific, and clearly stated goals for student learning appropriate to its mission, resources, tradition, student body, and community setting. Many accrediting bodies already require setting such goals, and the importance of doing so should be communicated widely. While these educational goals will vary from institution to institution, they should include the enrichment of both individual lives and our democratic society as a whole through the study of science, social science, the humanities, and the arts. By setting clear and ambitious goals, each institution can determine and communicate how it can best contribute to the realization of the potential of all its students.

**3** Each college and university should gather evidence about how well students in various programs are achieving learning goals across the curriculum and about the ability of its graduates to succeed in a challenging and rapidly changing world. The evidence gathered through this process should be used by each institution and its faculty to develop coherent, effective strategies for educational improvement. Accrediting organizations should likewise evaluate institutions by their performance in accord with institutional goals and develop consistent strategies for summarizing and making public their findings.

4 Each college and university should provide information about its basic characteristics, clearly communicate its educational mission, and describe its strategies for achieving its educational goals and their effectiveness. Both applicants and enrolled students, among others, need to understand the educational mission and goals as well as how broadly and deeply students are learning with respect to them. Hence, in addition to basic data about an institution, students and others should have access to an easily intelligible summary of conclusions drawn from evidence about student learning and a clear description of the process of continuous improvement on a campus. Such information and evidence will help the public learn more about the multiple aims of college study and about campus priorities for strengthening learning. And it will enable the faculty and staff, in partnership, to focus on shared goals for strengthening the quality of student attainment.

5 Understanding that the federal government has a responsibility to see that its funds are properly used, we recognize the importance of its careful monitoring of expenditures of its funds and its reliance on independent accrediting organizations to encourage systematic improvement of educational results. Within this context, we strongly endorse the principle that quality standards must be set and met by institutions themselves and not by external agencies. At the same time, we also call for continued efforts to reduce the costs and distractions imposed by unproductive governmental regulation.

6 As educational associations, we are committed to high standards for our institutions of higher education and their students. To achieve this new configuration of American higher education with its emphasis on transparency and accountability, colleges and universities will need ongoing support from governmental agencies, philanthropic foundations, corporations, and private donors. We will make every effort to demonstrate that such support results in increased learning, more creative and adaptable graduates, and a stronger competitive situation for the country as a whole.

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## ACTIONS

*Since our goal is nothing less than a comprehensive, broadly based effort to address the vital issues of transparency and accountability through rigorous attention to the performance of our colleges and universities, we commit ourselves to take specific actions and to encourage our colleagues throughout higher education to join with us in improving student learning.*

- 1** We will present these principles to our members and others and encourage a vigorous discussion with the goal of implementing them on campuses as fully as possible in the near future.
- 2** We will disseminate this document as widely as possible and encourage broad discussion of it.
- 3** We will keep pressing for the highest possible standards and expectations for student learning at every level. We will work with our members and others to help each college and university develop, articulate and make public its mission and educational goals, and to encourage the full realization of student potential through higher levels of student engagement, learning, and achievement.
- 4** We welcome the progress various associations of colleges and universities have made in developing widely agreed upon templates that will provide college applicants, their parents, legislators, and the general public with important data about demographics, admission and completion information, costs and financial aid, student engagement, and other relevant information. We will continue to give high priority to making such important information readily accessible.

5 We will encourage our members to augment such templates with clear descriptions of their educational goals for student accomplishment and with information about the practices they use to foster, assess and report student attainment of those goals.

6 We commend those organizations and their philanthropic supporters that have in recent years developed promising means of assessing important outcomes of higher education. Understanding that standardized measures currently address only a small part of what matters in college, we will work with foundations and campus partners to substantially expand the array of educationally valid and useful means—qualitative as well as quantitative—of assessing the full range of learning outcomes envisioned in this document.

7 Recognizing that setting high standards is not the same as standardization, we also support and encourage the development of assessments of student attainment that are anchored in the curriculum that faculty teach. Excellent work of this sort is already underway on many campuses, through assessments of common assignments, student portfolios, senior projects and similar efforts. We applaud these institutions and their faculty for taking the lead in creating and adopting ever-improving forms of evaluation. We will publicize their efforts and provide support and active assistance to help others do the same.

8 We will regularly report to the public on the overall progress made in achieving these actions.

We stand ready to be judged by the high standards this document sets for American higher education. Our students deserve nothing less.

Develop clear descriptions of educational goals... and assessments anchored in the curriculum that faculty teach.

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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 more than 1,150 accredited public and private colleges and 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. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).

**CHEA**<sup>®</sup>

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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is an institutional membership organization that coordinates institutional and programmatic accreditation in the United States. CHEA is a national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation. CHEA represents the interests of its members to the federal government on matters of accreditation and academic quality, reviews and affirms (“recognizes”) the quality of accrediting organizations and provides a range of membership and other services. Founded in 1996, approximately 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities are now members of CHEA. For additional information, please contact CHEA at [chea@chea.org](mailto:chea@chea.org) or visit the CHEA Web site at [www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org).