



## **Liberal Education: A Portal to Participation in the Global Economy**

*by Bethany Zecher Sutton, Liberal Education and America's Promise*

Among policy makers and the general public, debates about higher education currently swirl around the topics of access, completion and success (graduation rates), which are sometimes disguised under the headings of “value” and “quality.” Members of the higher education community, however, know there is much more to say about the quality of undergraduate education and, in particular, about the value of liberal education for today’s college students.

What if we could raise the level of debate above the simplistic and wrongheaded focus on “the most lucrative college majors” or “the fields that earn the highest salaries” and instead engage in a comprehensive and meaningful discussion about what really matters in a college education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What if we could discuss purposes of higher education beyond helping graduates get jobs?

What if we could also discuss the college’s role in preparing graduates to contribute and succeed as citizens—and as citizens of the world, not just their own immediate communities? What if we could talk about authentic ways to measure the quality of student learning, how to make general education more than just something to “get out of the way” and how to include all students, especially those from underserved communities, in the kinds of educational practices that are the most meaningful and rewarding?

### **LEAP into liberal education**

In 2005, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched a national initiative called Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) to champion the importance of a 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal education for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. LEAP challenges the traditional practice of providing a liberal education to some students and narrowing training to others.

Focused simultaneously on national advocacy, authentic evidence and campus action, LEAP seeks to:

- Engage the public with core questions about what really matters in college.

- Connect employers and educational leaders as they make the case for the importance of liberal education to the global economy and that of the United States.
- Work individually and collectively with institutions and systems to help all students achieve the essential learning outcomes that are critical for their futures.

LEAP believes the term “liberal education” encompasses the full meaning and purpose of a truly valuable undergraduate education (see the “Guide to frequently confused terms” below).

### **Liberal and Liberal Arts Education: A Guide to Frequently Confused Terms<sup>1</sup>**

**Liberal education:** An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity and change. It emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world—for example, science, culture and society—as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study—such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills—and includes a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

**Liberal arts:** Specific disciplines—for example, the humanities, sciences and social sciences.

**Liberal arts college:** A particular institutional type—often small and residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students while grounding its curriculum in the liberal arts disciplines.

**Artes liberales:** The historical basis for the modern liberal arts, which includes the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music).

**General education:** The part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual, civic and practical capacities. General education can take many forms and increasingly includes introductory, advanced and integrative forms of learning.

**Source:** Association of American Colleges & Universities, adapted from “Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College,” 2002.



In essence, LEAP responds to a new reality: The world is demanding more. There is a demand for more college-educated workers. There is a demand for more engaged citizens who are knowledgeable about themselves and the world around them. There is a demand that those educated workers and citizens have higher levels of learning and knowledge, as well as some new skills and abilities.

See the sidebars, “Employers Are Raising the Bar” and “U.S. Economy is Defined by Greater Workplace Challenges and Complexities,” for statistics on the U.S. workforce.

### **Employers Are Raising the Bar**

- 91% of employers say they are “asking employees to take on more responsibilities and to use a broader set of skills than in the past.”
- 90% of employers say their “employees are expected to work harder to coordinate with other departments than in the past.”
- 88% of employers say “the challenges their employees face are more complex than they were in the past.”
- 88% of employers agree “to succeed in their companies, employees need higher levels of learning and knowledge than they did in the past.”

**Source:** Association of American Colleges & Universities and Hart Research Associates, “Raising the Bar: Employers’ Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn,” 2010.

### **U.S. Economy is Defined by Greater Workplace Challenges and Complexities<sup>3</sup>**

- Every year, more than 1/3 of the entire U.S. labor force changes jobs.
- Recent trends indicate today’s students will likely have 10-14 jobs by the time they are 38 years old.
- 50% of workers have been with their company less than five years.
- Every year, more than 30 million Americans are working in jobs that did not exist in the previous quarter.

**Source:** Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov).

As citizens and residents of the United States, we face daunting challenges. These challenges stem from our multiple and multiplying cultures, our volatile economy, the many



social questions that divide and complicate our society, our fractured and contentious political realm, the communications and technological revolutions, education and equity, social mobility, the environment and our aging population. Further, as global citizens, we face challenges associated with poverty, war and human suffering; illiteracy and hunger; energy, water, and the environment; and terrorism and instability.

AAC&U's work with hundreds of its member colleges and universities tells us that curricular and pedagogical innovations—led by faculty—are already creating a new vision and new practices for undergraduate education that are directly connected to the needs and experiences of today's diverse students, our complex democracy and the interdependent global economy.

Drawing from the academy's expertise and wisdom, and with input from educators and employers, LEAP promotes:

- **Essential learning outcomes** as a guiding vision and national benchmarks for college learning and liberal education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- **High-impact educational practices** that help students achieve the essential learning outcomes.
- **Authentic assessments** that probe whether students can apply their learning to complex problems and real-world challenges.
- **Inclusive excellence** to ensure every student gets the benefits of an engaged and practical liberal education.

The essential learning outcomes, described in the sidebar “The Essential Learning Outcomes,” provide the cornerstone of the LEAP vision for higher education. According to a 2007 report, “the LEAP National Leadership Council disputes the idea that liberal education is achieved only through studies in arts and sciences disciplines. It also challenges the conventional view that liberal education is, by definition, ‘nonvocational.’”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, LEAP envisions an educational environment in which students pursue the essential learning outcomes across every field of study, including not only the traditional arts and sciences disciplines, but also nursing, engineering, biotechnology and business.

It is this multifaceted, complex and comprehensive approach to education that will prepare students for the multifaceted, complex and comprehensive world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Essential Learning Outcomes**

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges by gaining:

#### **Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world:**

- Through study in the sciences and math, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages and the arts.

***Focused** by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.*

#### **Intellectual and practical skills, including:**

- Inquiry and analysis.
- Critical and creative thinking.
- Written and oral communication.
- Quantitative literacy.
- Information literacy.
- Teamwork and problem solving.

***Practiced extensively**, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects and standards for performance*

#### **Personal and social responsibility, including:**

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global.
- Intercultural knowledge and competence.
- Ethical reasoning and action.
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning.

***Anchored** through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.*

#### **Integrative learning, including:**

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies.

***Demonstrated** through the application of knowledge, skills and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems.*



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## **References**

1. Association of American Colleges & Universities, "College Learning for the New Global Century," 2007.