



VOL. 101, NO. 1/2 • WINTER/SPRING 2015

# Liberal Education

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES



## The LEAP Challenge

Transforming for Students,  
Essential for Liberal Education

By Carol Geary Schneider

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# The LEAP Challenge

## Transforming for Students, Essential for Liberal Education

IN JANUARY 2015, at its Centennial annual meeting, AAC&U announced the LEAP Challenge, releasing to all participants the LEAP Challenge folio (<http://www.aacu.org/leap-challenge>) describing this long-term change initiative. The key concept at the center of the LEAP Challenge is that all college students need to prepare to contribute in a world marked by open or unscripted problems—problems where the right answer is far from known and where solutions are necessarily created under conditions of uncertainty. These are the kinds of problems we face in the economy, which today is fueled by innovation and ongoing, turbulent change. These are also, beyond doubt, the kinds of problems we face both in the global community and in our own diverse and deeply divided democracy. Some leaders speak of “wicked problems,” others of “grand challenges.” Whichever term you use, the fact is that our graduates are entering a world of extraordinary complexity and uncertainty. The solutions they create will hold lasting consequence for our shared future.

**All college students need to prepare to contribute in a world marked by open or unscripted problems**

The best way to prepare students to create solutions in a complex world, the LEAP

Challenge affirms, is to actively involve students in working on problem-centered inquiry from the time they enter college (and, optimally, before) until they successfully complete their degrees—two-year and four-year degrees alike. The “challenge,” then, is to prepare every college student—yes, every one of them—to engage complex problems and questions and to ensure that they develop facility in evidence-based inquiry, analysis, and decision making.

The focal point of the LEAP Challenge is each student’s completion of a significant project—extending across an entire semester or more—that represents the student’s own best work on a question or problem that matters to the student and to society. Because this is intended to be the student’s most significant accomplishment in college, we have termed this assignment “Signature Work.” For students in two-year institutions, Signature Work will be completed in the second year of college. For students who complete a bachelor’s degree, the sophomore experience will be preparatory, and students will complete more advanced Signature Work in the final phase of college. (See the sample guided pathway depicted on page 4.)

You may already be thinking, “Just one project? That’s hardly enough!” We agree. Students’ Signature Work should build from many prior efforts, across the entirety of the college experience. Signature Work should reflect and demonstrate cumulative and integrative learning across general and specialized studies. It is not intended as a one-off or an “add-on,” but rather as a centering expectation that helps students recognize and engage the larger purposes of their college study.

Signature Work can take many different forms and directions. It may explore an enduring issue, like virtue or altruism or the concept of a just society. It may explore a contemporary issue, like health disparities or housing policy in a specific community or state. It may be part of an ongoing research laboratory, focusing on issues like immune-cell proliferation. But whatever the subject and inquiry strategy, the Signature Work project should require students to integrate and apply their college learning—minimally, across more than one

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discipline, and frequently, between formal and informal or experiential learning.

Developed in the context of AAC&U's ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative,<sup>1</sup> the LEAP Challenge also is AAC&U's second-century call for higher education to help all students reap the most significant benefits of a liberal and liberating education. In the spirit of AAC&U's recently expanded mission,<sup>2</sup> it challenges higher education to make the most powerful forms of college learning inclusive, rather than exclusive.

The LEAP Challenge encompasses learners in all fields of study. It includes professional and career fields along with the full array of liberal arts and sciences. By positioning students as investigators and solution-generators, the LEAP Challenge draws together, quite deliberately, both the analytical inquiry strengths that have long characterized the liberal arts and sciences and the applied learning and professional responsibility strengths that have long characterized professional and career fields. In addition, the LEAP Challenge adds to liberal arts and career fields a strong focus on ethical and civic questions—questions about the larger and most responsible uses of knowledge. By design,

it moves such questions into the center of the required college curriculum.

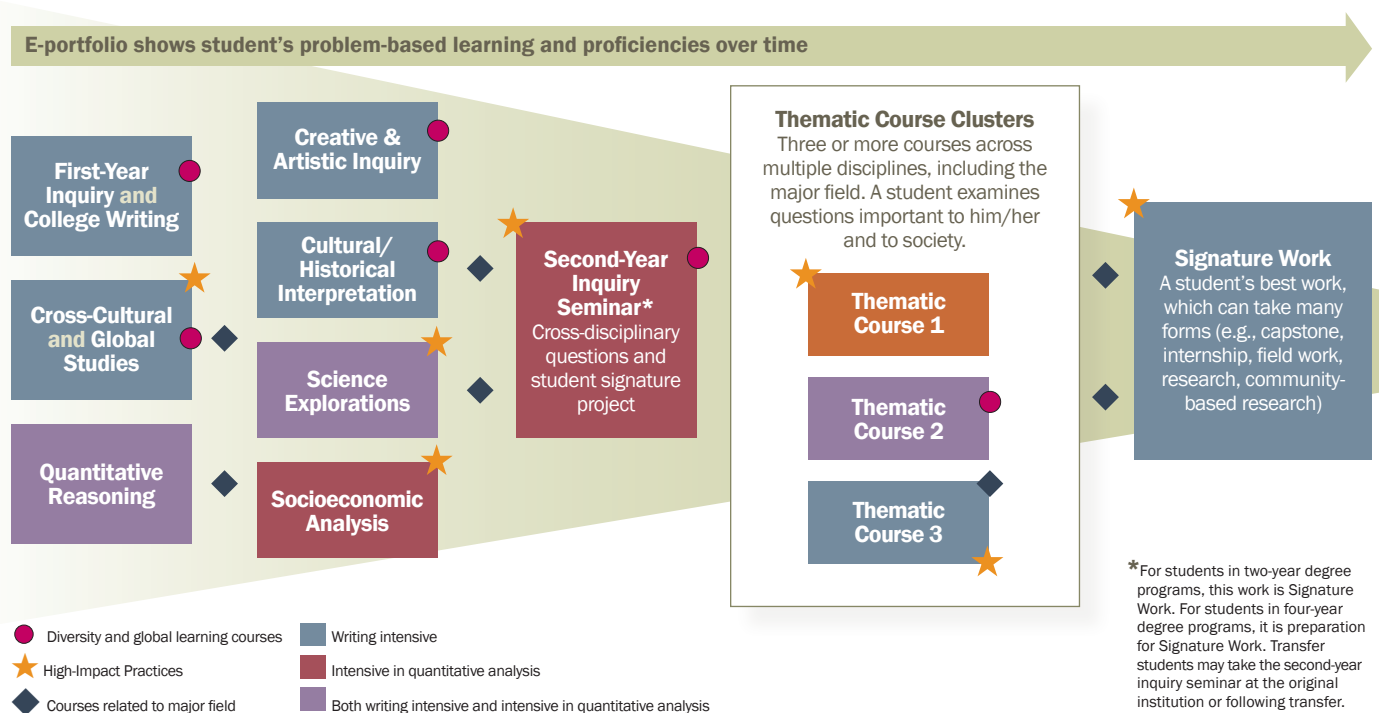
### To graduate, each student should complete Signature Work

The LEAP Challenge calls on colleges, universities, and community colleges to help each student identify a problem or question that matters, both to the student and to society, and complete a significant project related to that problem or question. Students' completion of such a project ought to become a degree qualification requirement, just as central to college graduation as the completion of the right number of courses in general education and major programs.

And, in a closely related corollary, the LEAP Challenge also calls on higher education to proactively prepare students—through guided practice beginning in the initial year of college—to undertake and complete such extended investigative and creative projects. This, in turn, will entail a redesign of students' educational pathways, away from the "breadth first, depth later" design established nearly a century ago and toward a new focus on integrative learning, across general and specialized studies.

### SAMPLE GUIDED PATHWAY WITH SIGNATURE WORK

Preparing students to do Signature Work will require thoughtful redesign of curricular pathways. This example of a general education pathway is rich in problem-based learning. It can be integrated with any well-designed major. Students taking this pathway would develop core intellectual skills and knowledge through exploration of big questions, and they would be required to apply their learning in their own Signature Work.





In the twentieth century, thanks to the division of labor among disciplines, students' most advanced work tended to be located within the discourse of disparate disciplines—engaged with scholarly debate, but not necessarily concerned with how society makes use of knowledge. Today, in a knowledge-driven global community, we need to ensure that students can connect their own specializations to ongoing work in related fields as well as to the various realms of concerted action—public action, economic action, civic action. Complex problems, after all, rarely come in neatly divided packages labeled “literature,” “history,” or “chemistry.” Instead, they invite perspectives of many different kinds—historical, ethical, systemic, technical, and practical.

Whereas scholars from an earlier era pulled problems apart into disciplinary configurations in order to develop greater methodological sophistication, a focus on problem-centered inquiry requires us to help students put knowledge together and examine questions from multiple points of view, including perspectives related to action, implementation, and evaluation of the intended results. Disciplines are still foundational, of course. They still help students develop analytical focus and methodological rigor. But in the twenty-first century, graduates need to be able to think and work across disciplinary boundaries, both in their own approaches to complex questions and in their ability to engage colleagues whose views and analytical perspectives are different from their own.

Problem-centered inquiry further requires learners to think through the implications and consequences of their choices and decisions. What are the costs? What are the benefits? Who is most directly affected, for better or worse, by a set of choices? Can negative consequences be ameliorated? The visible evidence of how well higher education is doing in educating ethical problem-solvers will be each student's Signature Work: tangible evidence about the graduate's readiness to tackle complex questions in the world beyond college.

### **Signature Work should include reflective learning**

As noted, Signature Work can take many different forms, depending on the individual student's goals, interests, and choice of concentration. Signature Work might be a major research project done independently or collaboratively. It might be a portfolio showing a body of work related to the

student's inquiry and findings. It might be an internship or practicum in which the student produces significant work and provides additional reflection on the learning gained from the experience of working in a field-based setting. It might be a creative project—the writing of a play or the making of a documentary. For working students (and most students do, in fact, work) the project can become a way to connect their studies with their job responsibilities.

In addition, Signature Work should also include a societal reflection component. For example, a student working on issues related to literacy, health care, or nutrition would explore not just the project at hand, but the larger systemic and policy context in which such issues are embedded. Or, a student completing a business strategy plan for an organization would explore not just products and services, but ways that a strategy can serve community needs and interests. Students working on basic research can and should spend time on the processes by which breakthrough knowledge is translated into new products and services. They should be invited to consider the ethical and equity dilemmas that are inherent in all these processes, along with their own roles and responsibilities in making choices that keep equity and ethics centrally in view.

Whatever the form and whatever the subject matter, students' Signature Work should always include significant writing and significant reflection on their own journeys of exploration and discovery. It should always be done with faculty mentors so that students can benefit directly from faculty members' wealth of experience in scholarly inquiry and exploration.

### **From academically adrift to creatively adroit**

Of course, preparing students to grapple productively with complex issues and choices is, or ought to be, the point of the entire educational experience, from school through college. The typical American, seeing college as a gateway to expanded opportunity, implicitly takes this notion as a given. But, in fact, higher education has embraced this responsibility to help students integrate and apply their learning quite unevenly.

Some students receive a superb preparation in analytic inquiry, collaborative problem solving, and ethical reflection. Students already do some version of Signature Work in virtually every honors program in the country, for example. But as assessment evidence consistently

shows, the majority of students do not develop these inquiry and solution-generating capacities at anything like the level of proficiency they really need.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, scholars who study learning in higher education routinely point out that the divides in student engagement and achievement are deeper within any given institution than are the divides in deep learning across different types of institutions.<sup>4</sup>

With this evidence of widespread underachievement as a prompt, the LEAP Challenge is designed to help us focus our efforts and redesign our curricular pathways so that every student, regardless of background or intended career, will actively work on problem- or question-centered inquiry, from the initial year in college to final culminating work. Engaging students early, often, and cumulatively in problem-centered inquiry is a way to help them tangi-

bly improve their levels of achievement. In the words of our colleague Paul Gaston, it will help our graduates become “adroit,” rather than “adrift.”

**The divides in student engagement and achievement are deeper within any given institution than are the divides in deep learning across different types of institutions**

#### **Aggregating credits is *not* the point of college**

A key idea behind the LEAP Challenge is that college study has to be more than the completion of discrete courses. If our goal is to create self-directed lifelong learners, then at some point each student has to take the lead—with mentors—in shaping his or her own self-initiated course of inquiry. And, if we seek to educate students who can work constructively with others, we should ensure that at least some aspects of students’ inquiry and creative studies will be done collaboratively, with peers and/or community partners as well as with faculty mentors.

By labeling this “Signature Work,” we are saying to the student: “This should be your most substantial college accomplishment. It’s not just one more paper, and it’s not something you can finish in a couple of days or a week. This is your opportunity to think through a complex set of issues, to do research, to consult with others, and then to take responsibility for the quality and integrity of the final accomplishment.”

In addition, we are saying to the academy, and especially to policy leaders who currently are far more focused on efficiency and job placement than on the quality of student learning, that the

old ways of counting progress toward the degree mask fundamental questions about what students can do with their learning. Especially as we move into an era in which students are increasingly “constructing” the degree with courses taken everywhere and anywhere, we need to ensure that students can successfully integrate their learning and apply it to meaningful problems of the students’ own devising.

Today, policy leaders are simply not asking whether students’ experience of college was designed to ensure that they leave ready to apply their learning to new contexts and open-ended problems. Nor are they asking why it is that some students at virtually every college, university, and community college participate in the most enriching and empowering forms of college learning, while the majority do not. But this, in my view, is exactly where college accountability ought to go.

Graduation rates are a shallow indicator. What we really need are quality learning indicators. The LEAP Challenge points toward a new generation of indicators of excellence.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been reporting for some time that, over the course of a four-, five-, or six-year college journey, the average college student participates in fewer than two of the “high-impact practices” NSSE tracks, which include service learning, learning communities, internships, undergraduate research, capstone projects, and study abroad. AAC&U’s own studies have found that, on average, students engage in between 1 and 2 (1.3) high-impact practices.<sup>5</sup> Depressingly, though unsurprisingly, first-generation students participate in these high-impact practices less frequently than students from college-educated families.

AAC&U is calling on higher education and on policy leaders to engage proactively with that quality learning shortfall and to do so in ways that make college empowering for all students, especially first-generation and underserved students. And, as policy leaders focus on expedited ways to help students quickly collect the course credits they need, AAC&U is affirming that college learning needs to be characterized by something more than the aggregation of course credits.

The right policy choice, we contend, is a new focus on completion with demonstrated achievement. That “demonstrated achievement” ought to be each student’s accomplishment of a substantial piece of Signature Work. Eventually, the VALUE rubrics can be used to assess what such work

reveals about the level and quality of students' achievement of essential learning outcomes or proficiencies.<sup>6</sup> But the first step in a new approach to accountability is to ensure that all students are doing the kind of work that builds their capacities to deal with complexity.

### **47 percent of college students already do culminating work. Why not 100 percent?**

AAC&U does not build its major initiatives *de novo*. Rather, we track educational reform movements in the making and, where the evidence suggests that these movements will improve the intentionality and quality of liberal learning, we do what we can to accelerate the pace of change. The LEAP Challenge is intended to highlight, accelerate, and significantly strengthen reform agendas that faculty have already put in motion across US higher education.

The LEAP Challenge builds specifically on the documented power of a family of engaged learning practices that now are labeled “high impact” because of their well-documented correlations with higher levels of persistence and learning (see sidebar). The LEAP Challenge also builds on the power of faculty members' own judgment about forms of learning that engage and empower today's highly diverse, and diversely prepared, college students.

While the evidence concerning high-impact practices now invites educators to describe them as a kind of set, each of the practices itself represents a discrete reform movement developed and advanced over decades by dedicated faculty members and staff across a wide swathe of different institutional contexts. Through our projects and our many conferences and summer institutes, AAC&U observed these practices as they developed and spread widely across the academy.

Starting as early as 2002, we became proactive in seeking out evidence about the educational results of these practices for students. In partnership with George Kuh and NSSE, we helped develop and promulgate evidence showing that these practices improve learning and persistence.<sup>7</sup> It has been highly confirming to see the expansion of student participation in high-impact practices become a stated goal for many colleges, universities, community colleges, and even state systems.

The LEAP Challenge builds on and indeed incorporates the full spectrum of high-impact

practices. But it also singles out from the family of empirically high-value practices the concept of capstone or culminating work.

The concept of engaging students systematically in experiences that help them synthesize and apply their learning to significant problems is itself a high-impact reform still in the making, one that AAC&U has worked to promote and accelerate since 1990. At that time, while working in partnership with a dozen scholarly fields ranging from history and economics to biology and women's studies, AAC&U called on higher education leaders and faculty to help all college students integrate and apply learning from their major fields and from their other studies as well.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1990, the notion that students ought to do some kind of culminating work has gained significant ground. NSSE provides us with a very rough benchmark concerning progress in making culminating work expected at the BA and BS levels. According to NSSE, 47 percent of graduating seniors report that they have “completed a culminating senior experience,” with the spread extending from 41 percent at research universities to 75 percent in baccalaureate colleges.<sup>9</sup> To my knowledge, there is no comparable data set for the associate's degree. However, we can see from AAC&U's ongoing national initiatives with

#### **HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES**

The teaching and learning practices listed below have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students, especially those from groups that historically have been underserved by higher education. These practices take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts.

- First-Year Experiences
- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects
- Undergraduate Research
- Diversity/Global Learning
- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses and Projects

More information about high-impact practices is available online at [www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices](http://www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices).

community colleges that the concept of a capstone course or experience is gaining ground at the two-year level as well.

The NSSE finding that almost half of graduating seniors do culminating work shows us that the LEAP Challenge is intersecting with movement toward more intentionally integrative designs for college learning. But it also shows us that we will have to double the number of those actually completing “signature” or culminating work if we really want to influence the quality and focus of students’ college learning.

### **Employers strongly endorse the work-related value of students’ Signature Work**

AAC&U is recommending the LEAP Challenge because we believe student engagement in inquiry- and problem-

centered learning is good educational practice. That said, with the entire society intensely focused on creating stronger connections between

college and the economy, it is good news that employers think Signature Work would represent a much-needed improvement in the quality of college learning and in students’ preparation for success in the workplace.

As part of the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has commissioned five separate national surveys exploring employers’ views on the learning that would help graduates thrive in the economy. The latest of these surveys, released in January 2015, explored in quite a bit of detail what kinds of applied-learning experiences would give students a hiring advantage. Following are the top five learning experiences that employers believe help students in the job selection process (followed by the percentage of employers who endorsed these specific practices as helpful to graduates):<sup>10</sup>

- Internship/apprenticeship with company/organization (94%)
- Senior thesis/project demonstrating knowledge, research, problem-solving, communication skills (87%)
- Research project done collaboratively with peers (80%)
- Service-learning project with community organization (69%)
- Field-based project in diverse community

with people from different background/culture (66%)

So, in sum, employers will be highly supportive of the hands-on turn that the LEAP Challenge is bringing to college learning and liberal education. Indeed, seven out of ten employers think that applied-learning experiences should be required for all students.<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, exactly what the LEAP Challenge is recommending.

### **Liberal education will flourish by embracing the future, and by solving its own inherent problems**

In what follows, I offer a few thoughts on the significance of the LEAP Challenge as it relates to the longer trajectory of high-quality liberal learning and, especially, AAC&U’s determined efforts to make the most empowering forms of learning a resource for all students.

*The LEAP Challenge and the digital revolution.* In releasing the LEAP Challenge, we assume that the digital revolution will proceed apace and that students will construct their own combinations of face-to-face, digitally supported and blended forms of learning—optimally, with strong social support and guidance. The question is not whether this will happen; the digital revolution has begun, and it will undoubtedly gain momentum as it moves forward. Rather, the question is how we can help students ensure that the different parts of their learning add up to genuine empowerment for them. Students are entering a world of unscripted problems. How can we ensure that their particular blends of study prepare them to navigate an era of far-reaching change and, even more important, to help solve problems that are important to them and to our society?

The LEAP Challenge is AAC&U’s response to that question. It seeks to make liberal education work better for today’s students—those learning online primarily and those learning in blended settings. It seeks to honor the individual faculty-member’s role as a scholar-researcher by creating opportunities for faculty to teach students the arts of inquiry and analysis, and it seeks to work with faculty in helping students apply those arts to open-ended questions and problems. In online settings, students can use digital tools and virtual communities to do their projects. But their learning will be deeper and more significant than the simple completion of the inscribed requirements of particular digital courses and course assignments.

*The LEAP Challenge and the problem of*



**fostering general education.** General education is an American signature, reflecting the distinctive view that college study should not be focused primarily or exclusively on a single academic or career field but, rather, should engage students in learning across the full range of the humanities, social sciences, arts, sciences, and mathematics. Why do we insist on this broad learning? The traditional argument, which one can trace back to the eighteenth century, is that citizens in a self-governing democracy need broadly educated leaders who, because of their broad learning, can make wise choices for the republic. More recently, educators have affirmed that *all* college graduates need intentional preparation for civic participation.<sup>12</sup> They have also affirmed that broad learning helps students situate their potential career interests in a larger context. Employers themselves endorse the importance of broad learning for career success. Four separate surveys conducted by Hart Research Associates have shown persuasively that employers prefer breadth plus depth as career preparation over an exclusive focus on a single field of study.<sup>13</sup>

But with all that said, general education has become, for many students, a perplexing wasteland of disconnected courses taken across the liberal arts and sciences. Typically, almost all students are advised to get these requirements “out of the way” as soon as possible. Neither the advisors giving such advice nor the students receiving it hold any expectation that students will actually use their broad learning for any purpose other than to fulfill institutional requirements for the degree. In our current era of efficiency-mindedness and chronic cost-cutting, requirements without apparent purpose are poised to sound a death knell for multidisciplinary college education—that is, for liberal education.

The LEAP Challenge is intended to bring a renewed sense of purpose and direction to students’ general studies. Since Signature Work draws on multiple disciplines, not just the major, it instantiates the expectation that students should use their general education learning to explore a significant problem from more than one analytic perspective. The LEAP Challenge also invites students to take upper-level courses in order to meet general education requirements and to tie those courses directly to their Signature Work. In other words, the LEAP Challenge invites educators to connect the stated rationale for general education—broad learning is

absolutely necessary for both civic participation and career success—to the actual practice of general education. And, it will help students themselves discover, at long last, a meaningful answer to the perennial question, “Why do I have to take these courses?”

**The LEAP Challenge and students’ career and vocational interests.** Preparing for AAC&U’s Centennial, I read back through early volumes of *The Bulletin* and *Liberal Education*, the journal in which the organization faithfully recorded speeches from early annual meetings as well as articles probing the state of college learning.<sup>14</sup> If a single theme is constant, it is the complaint that students are too vocational, too intent on reducing college studies to preparation for their careers. Yet, now that higher education is deliberately drawing learners from all parts of the income scale, with special emphasis on low-income students, it stands to reason that students’ career orientation has only intensified.

The LEAP initiative in general and the LEAP Challenge in particular invite educators to reframe the relationship between college learning and careers. For too long, we have vainly sought to entice students to worry about higher questions, while dismissing their entirely understandable view that college should be a portal to expanded opportunity in the economy and in the larger society. This is really a kind of class bigotry, a fundamental indifference to the very practical concerns that bring low-income learners to college in the first place.

The LEAP Challenge takes an entirely different tack. It is quite likely that many, perhaps the vast majority of students, will do Signature Work related to their career interests. Currently, the 47 percent of seniors who do culminating work most likely do so because their departments require senior projects. And, more often than not, students have chosen majors that, in their own minds at least, relate to their career interests and trajectories. The LEAP Challenge capitalizes by design on students’ desire to prepare for career opportunity and success. As advisors can point out, employers prefer graduates who have completed significant projects in college.<sup>15</sup>

But the LEAP Challenge also is designed to enlarge students’ perspectives on how to use knowledge creatively, ethically, and responsibly. If well designed, Signature Work projects will be inquiry driven, cross disciplinary, integrative, and ethically reflective. Instead of leaving graduates

essentially on their own in connecting learning with work, Signature Work can model a process that provides faculty-mentored guidance on how to construct a project worth doing and faculty-guided reflection on what students, individually and together, have discovered through their attempts to integrate knowing and doing, learning and solution generation. Signature Work will focus on what it means to do work worth the effort.

In addition, Signature Work instantiates the idea that the knowledge and skills developed through a broad and multidimensional liberal education come to fullest fruition when they are put to active use—intentionally, ethically, and reflectively. Instead of pitting civic learning and career learning against one another, as educators so often do, Signature Work creates a way to bring civic questions and applied or practical questions together. In sum, Signature Work brings a much-needed integrative center to the heart of liberal education and students' liberal learning. It will help us fulfill the “promise” of a life-enhancing liberal education.

### **Carpe diem**

The long-term point of the LEAP Challenge is inherent in the title we have chosen for this

long-term change effort. To prepare our students for a challenging world, we must chart a new course for college learning. While there remains much to learn as we follow this

course, we do need to keep in mind a single, historically grounded truth: liberal education has remained our premier educational tradition because its practices constantly adapt to a changing world. The goals endure across time and place—fostering broad learning, cultivating the powers of the mind, developing commitments to civic and ethical responsibility—but the practices necessarily change.

Breadth and depth became the next great thing for the practice of liberal education in 1909, when Harvard College instituted a new regime of distribution and concentration for undergraduate study. Over the next few decades, most of higher education followed suit. But that was a century ago. Today, our society needs braided learning that teaches students how to bring breadth, depth, inquiry, and application to bear on specific

**Signature Work creates a way to bring civic questions and applied or practical questions together**



AAC&U Annual Meeting

complex questions. This is the next frontier for liberal education in our time. We invite—and challenge—our members to make this much-needed LEAP.

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author's name on the subject line.

### NOTES

1. Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) is AAC&U's ongoing signature initiative. Launched in 2005, it provides a comprehensive and inclusive framework for college learning and reform that includes “essential learning outcomes,” engaged or “high-impact” learning practices intended to help students practice and achieve the essential learning outcomes, and VALUE rubrics for assessing students' progress toward achievement of the outcomes. LEAP encompasses all areas of college study, including professional and career fields. For more information, see [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).
2. In 2012, the association's board of directors approved a new mission statement, making “inclusive excellence” a mission-level priority: “The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.”
3. See Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Ashley Finley, *Making Progress? What We Know about the Achievement of Liberal Education Outcomes* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012); Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).
4. See Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
5. Tia Brown McNair and Ashley Finley, *Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013), 7.
6. Developed by teams of faculty and other educational professionals as part of AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project, the VALUE rubrics are sixteen templates, each of which helps evaluators assess the level of competence represented in



a collection of exemplary student work (a paper, a performance, a community service project, etc.) and also can be adapted to assess the work of individual students. Each rubric addresses five to six key criteria for a particular competency (e.g., quantitative literacy), and the evaluator determines which level of competence the student's piece of work demonstrates: a benchmark level, one of two milestone levels, or the highest capstone level. For more information or to download the rubrics, visit [www.aacu.org/value/rubrics](http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics).

7. See George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008); Jayne E. Brownell and Lynn E. Swaner, *Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010); George D. Kuh and Ken O'Donnell, *Ensuring Quality and Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013); Tia Brown McNair and Ashley Finley, *Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013).

8. See AAC (Association of American Colleges), *The Challenge of Connecting Learning: Project on Liberal Learning, Study-in-Depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major* (Washington, DC: AAC, 1991).

9. National Survey of Student Engagement, *Bringing the Institution into Focus: Annual Results 2014* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2014), 41.

10. Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015), 9.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. See National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012).

13. *How Should Colleges Prepare Students to Succeed in Today's Global Economy?* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006); *How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning? Employers' Views on the Accountability Challenge* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008); *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010); *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013).

14. The association's quarterly journal, *The Bulletin* (launched in 1915), was retitled *Liberal Education* in 1959.

15. See Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short?; It Takes More than a Major*.

## THE LEAP PRINCIPLES OF EXCELLENCE

The LEAP Principles of Excellence offer both challenging standards and flexible guidance so they can support high-quality learning at any college or university. These principles can be used to guide change and to influence practice across the disciplines and in general education programs. Signature Work is a natural outgrowth of these principles.

### Principle One

*Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive*  
Make the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes 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 that is focused 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.



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This article originally appeared in *Liberal Education*, Winter/Spring 2015 issue. It has been reprinted with the permission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

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