

# **LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE LEARNING ALL COLLEGE STUDENTS NEED**

**A History of AAC&U's Work—Over Three Decisive Decades--  
To Make Educational Excellence Inclusive, Not Exclusive**

**Prepared for the Association of American Colleges and Universities**

**Carol Geary Schneider  
President Emerita, AAC&U and  
Fellow, Lumina Foundation**

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# Liberal Education's Next Frontier: Preparing Students to *Apply* Their Cross-Disciplinary Liberal Learning

Carol Geary Schneider, President Emerita, AAC&U, and Advisor, Lumina Foundation

**Context:** Higher Education is – Once Again -- Under Assault. The Value of College is Dismissed While Silver Bullet Fallacies That Micro-Credentials Provide Career Success Are All the Rage. Pundits Assure Us (Again) That the “Liberal Arts”—and by Extension, Liberal Arts Colleges--Do Not “Sell.”

**A Larger Perspective:** Annapolis Group Colleges are Part of a Great Tradition—The US Commitment to the Power and Value of a Liberal and Liberating Education. That Tradition has Flourished Because It Is Founded on Essential Purposes, Because Those Purposes Empower Learners, AND Because **Liberal Education Has Continually Adapted Its Practices to the Needs of a Changing World.**

**The Challenge:** **Externally**, We Need to Tell a New Story About How *Applied* Cross-Disciplinary Learning Prepares Students to Create Solutions for the Future, in the Economy and in a Divided Democracy. **Internally**, We Need to Ensure That We’re Successfully Graduating *Principled* Practitioners: Purposeful, Resourceful, and Creatively Adaptive, in Their Careers and in Their Lives.

**The Good News:** The Reinvention of Liberal Education (Still America’s Premier Educational Tradition) is Already Well Advanced. Educators Have Already Created **New Frameworks for Quality Liberal Learning**—Across All Majors--That **Connect Essential Purposes to the Realities of a Diverse World and a Fast-Paced, Innovation-Fueled Economy.**

**The Enduring and Essential Purposes of a Liberal and Liberating Education:**

- 1) Developing the Powers of the Mind; 2) Cultivating Commitments Beyond Self: Ethical, Civic, Societal; 3) Providing Leadership Knowledge—i.e., the Knowledge Needed for Agency and Influence in One’s Own Time.

**The New Frameworks for Liberal Education** (For More Detail, See Next Page)

- 1) Powers of the Mind: A Strong Focus on a Suite of Intellectual/Problem-solving Skills;
- 2) Commitments Beyond Self: Guided Exploration of Personal and Social Responsibilities – Ethical, Civic, Intercultural – Anchored in Direct Involvement with Diverse Communities and with Problems That Need Solutions;
- 3) Leadership Knowledge: Connecting Liberal Arts and All Studies to Larger Questions, Both Contemporary and Enduring, **AND** to the Realities of an Innovation-Fueled Economy;
- 4) **And, In Addition, A Twenty-First Century Purpose: Preparing Students to INTEGRATE, ADAPT, And *APPLY* Their Learning to Complex Problems and Real-World Settings.**

**Complex Problem-Solving Requires Much More Than a Major:** Public and Policy Obsession With “The Major” is Out of Sync with the Demands of the Economy and the Needs of a Diverse and Fluid World. Teaching Students to Apply Their Learning Will Require New Capacity to *Draw Learning from Multiple Contexts*—From Different Fields of Expertise and from Practical Experience as Well. To Prepare for a Complex World, All Students Can Be Challenged and Prepared to Identify Their Own Questions and Produce Substantive, Integrative Work on Problems That Matter. Creative Colleges Already Are Moving In This Direction. It’s Time to Turn a Spotlight on Your Students’ Own “Signature Work.”

**Employers as Allies:** (For More Detail: See AAC&U’s 2018 Employer Research: [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org))

**Employers Prefer Job Candidates With Research, Field-Based, and Project Experience.** They—and Your Own Graduates—Can Help “Make the Case” that Big Picture Thinking and Hands-On Experience, **Combined**, Provide Students’ Best Preparation Both for the Economy and for Life.

## New Frameworks for High Quality and Applied Liberal Learning

**Higher Education Is Creating New Frameworks for Liberal Education That Link Liberal Arts and Career Fields and Foster Inclusive Excellence.** Through its LEAP initiative—Liberal Education and America’s Promise—the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has developed a **21<sup>st</sup> century framework** for an empowering and contemporary college education. Lumina Foundation has developed the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) which provides **design principles** that help faculty members translate broad goals for quality liberal learning into well-designed degree programs—encompassing all majors-- at the associate, bachelor’s, and master’s level. **Both frameworks apply to all college learners and all majors.**

To Provide Students With an Empowering Education, LEAP Promotes

**Essential Learning Outcomes**—the inquiry learning outcomes people need for success in life, civil society, and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These outcomes include 1) broad knowledge of culture, science and society, as well as competence in specific major fields; 2) intellectual and practical skills, including inquiry and analysis; critical and creative thinking; written and oral communication; quantitative literacy; information literacy; teamwork and problem-solving with diverse partners; 3) studies and experiences related to democratic and global citizenship and intercultural competence; and 4) **hands-on learning experiences that foster integrative, applied, and adaptive learning.**

**High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs)**—ways of engaging and challenging students—including first year experiences, intensive writing, collaborative assignments, diversity and intercultural experiences; undergraduate research, service learning, internships, learning communities and major (capstone) projects that help students achieve and demonstrate Essential Learning Outcomes.

→ **Signature Work**—challenging higher education to prepare all students to complete a substantial cross-disciplinary project in a topic significant to the student and society, as part of the expected pathway to a college degree and career success. The signature project can take many forms—e.g., capstone, internship, field work, research, community-based projects, creative work, ePortfolio, etc.

**Authentic Assessments**—using students’ own work and faculty-validated VALUE rubrics to probe whether individual students have developed the Essential Learning Outcomes and can apply their learning to complex questions and significant inquiry projects.

**Cross-Cultural Learning Is Essential, not Optional: Keyed to the Needs of a Diverse and Complex World, both the LEAP Framework and the DQP Emphasize Multiple Forms of Diversity Learning:**

Broad, Big Picture Learning Across the Liberal Arts and Sciences – Including **Knowledge of Histories, Cultures, and World Views In Addition To One’s Own—US and Global;**

High Level Analytic Inquiry and Communication Skills – Including the Skills of **Engaging Differing Perspectives and Solving Problems with Diverse Partners, on Campus and in Society;**

Personal and Social Responsibility—With Explicit Attention to **Civic, Cross-Cultural And Ethical Questions**, in the Curriculum, Professional Roles, and Diverse “Real-World” Contexts;

Integrative, Adaptive and Applied Learning—Showing That Students Can Apply Their Knowledge, Skills, and Examined Responsibilities to **Significant Questions and Problems, including Problems That a Diverse and Justice-Seeking Democracy Urgently Needs to Solve.**

**The Challenge Ahead: Helping Students Engage, Practice and Develop These Capacities, Both as Catalysts for Powerful College Learning and—Crucially—for Their Lives Beyond College.**

Adapted from AAC&U and Lumina Sources by  
Carol Geary Schneider, President Emerita, AAC&U, and Fellow, Lumina Foundation