

## **Liberal Education and America's Promise: Goals, Major Successes; Challenges Remaining**

Launched in January 2005, LEAP has been a decade-long effort to promote the most important goals for college learning and to advance needed changes that will prepare college students for 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges and ensure that liberal learning serves all college learners, not just a fraction of them. LEAP promotes a “revisionist approach” to liberal education, contending that all fields of study—including professional and technical fields—need to help students achieve a cross-cutting set of Essential Learning Outcomes (ELO).

The ELOs have become the touchstone for the entire LEAP endeavor and for hundreds of colleges, universities, and community colleges.

While LEAP initially was intended to culminate with AAC&U's 2015 Centennial, it has become over time a guiding “compass” for the entirety of AAC&U's work. Accordingly, AAC&U's Board has charged staff to envision the next generation of LEAP work – work to be highlighted and “launched” in AAC&U's 2015 Centennial Year. In response, AAC&U developed The Leap Challenge, which was released in January 2015, and which now guides a “family” of interrelated LEAP Challenge funded projects.

LEAP includes 11 official state partners, several other higher education consortial partners, and hundreds of individual institutional members of the LEAP Campus Action Network. Five of these states and at least 7 other state systems are partnering with LEAP in a major study of students' college-level achievement on selected ELOs.

LEAP has become, in sum, a “brand” with which those working on quality in undergraduate education want to be associated. LEAP enjoys a special partnership with Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP).

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### **Initial Goals and Successes To-Date; Challenges Going Forward**

#### **1. Spark public debate about the quality of college learning...and learning outcomes that are essential for students\*\*\*\***

- The LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) are being used by hundreds of institutions and were incorporated in Lumina Foundation's widely circulated “Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP)” – which AAC&U helped write. Lumina's commitment to the DQP as a focus for further foundation work has thus become a vehicle for advancing engagement with the LEAP ELOs.
- LEAP-commissioned research on employer priorities for college learning has garnered significant media coverage and has been widely cited by educational leaders and commentators, lending credence to the argument that achieving the ELOs is the best preparation for today's economy.
- Thanks to the LEAP emphasis on civic learning as a key goal for college, AAC&U became a primary partner in Department of Education and White-House sponsored work on civic learning/engagement as a key goal of college. The LEAP civic learning emphasis is now being advanced through an AAC&U-staffed coalition of 13 civic-focused national organizations and foundations (Bonner; Kettering).
- Ten state systems (at least) have used the LEAP ELO's to inform their own expected learning outcomes; the California State University system adopted them, as written, in system-wide policy.

**Note: Stars (\*) next to the goals, below, indicate rate of success on this goal – with 5 total possible stars**

- Ninety percent of AAC&U members report that they value LEAP and over 350 have enlisted as LEAP Campus Action Members. The 78% of colleges and universities that have adopted learning outcomes for their students report a high degree of congruence with the LEAP ELOs.

**Action Challenges:** Widespread use of LEAP ELOs notwithstanding, these shared goals for learning need to program pathways in general education and majors, together, if students are in fact to achieve them.

**Advocacy Challenges:** While LEAP has huge traction across all parts of higher education, the public still believes that the “major” is the only thing that matters to career success. Public dialogue remains focused on outdated models that “define” liberal education as exclusively a matter of majoring in a humanities or social sciences field and/or attending a liberal arts college.

## **2. Help all students—including those traditionally underserved in higher education....achieve the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes\*\*\***

- One of the biggest LEAP “wins” to-date has been the discovery – led by LEAP NLC member George Kuh—that students who take part in a set of LEAP-identified “high impact practices”(HIPS) are more likely to finish college and more likely to achieve the outcomes of liberal education. Moreover, using data collected by the National Survey of Student Engagement, Kuh identified a “compensatory benefit” from participation in HIPS experienced by various sets of “at-risk” students, specifically African Americans, Latinos, and less well-prepared college students.
- The HIPS research and concept has been taken up everywhere. For example, the CSU system is investing \$19 million to expand students’ participation in HIPS this year and next.
- The LEAP Challenge builds on the evidence from HIPS research, and seeks to ensure that all students prepare to and successfully produce culminating or “signature work,” thereby making multiple HIPS required.

**Action Challenge:** Future work on HIPS (and ELOs as well) needs to engage the potential of the digital revolution. More work is needed on evaluating and documenting the quality and impact of HIPS. AAC&U has received funding to work on this and related equity issues.

## **3. Challenge the belief that students must choose either a liberal education or a practical education by advancing reforms that blend liberal and practical or applied learning.\*\***

- AAC&U’s work with “broad access” institutions, especially community colleges, has developed multiple models for blending students’ career studies with broader liberal learning.
- AAC&U also has been a major partner in developing undergraduate programs in public health that deliberately integrate the ELOs with students’ career preparation.
- By merging with Project Kaleidoscope, a science reform group, AAC&U has begun to promote models that integrate science and technical fields with broader societal, cultural, and ethical questions.
- Through the LEAP Presidents’ Trust, AAC&U is sponsoring events that bring together employers and educators, and that feature promising practices in academic and career advising and in curricular models that blend liberal and applied learning and help students to successfully navigate the pathways from college to career.

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**Action AND Advocacy Challenge:** LEAP needs a way to better illuminate the value and power of “blended designs” for liberal and professional learning and to help students and public alike expect both forms of learning, creatively combined. AAC&U sees science and technology as the best way to make the case for broad and specialized learning, together.

#### **4. Document national, state, and institutional progress in student achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes\*\*\*\***

- This is another “big win” for LEAP. With major federal and corporate support, AAC&U has developed VALUE “rubrics” keyed to 16 of the ELOs, and is spearheading a major effort to move students’ own work—evaluated with the rubrics—to the center of assessment effort in higher education. A national research center has reported a huge spike in the number of campuses now using rubrics to assess student work and ties this spike directly to the LEAP “VALUE” rubrics.
- With funding from Gates and others, LEAP partnered with 12 state systems to develop a national strategy and platform for assessing students’ achievement of the ELOS using VALUE rubrics. Work on this initiative is ongoing and initial findings were just released. AAC&U now seeks to make VALUE a self-supporting platform for documenting students’ achievement of the ELOs.
- In partnership with university research centers, LEAP also has published major syntheses of the national research on students’ underachievement of the ELOs, both in 2005 and again in 2012, along with more targeted reports on student participation in HIPS, and students’ achievement of selected ELOs.

**Action AND Advocacy Challenge:** Advancing far-reaching change in the U.S. approach to assessment—a term widely thought to be synonymous with “testing”—is a major undertaking. Yet, if we can focus shared attention on how well students can apply their learning to complex projects and research, the LEAP approach to assessment may be AAC&U’s most important contribution to meaningful reform in U.S. higher education. We also need to help publicize the potential—for learning and transparency—of e-portfolios.

#### **5. Highlight and counter...practices that steer some students to narrow educational tracks while the most advantaged students reap the full benefits of a broad liberal education. (no stars)**

**Challenge:** While LEAP has worked actively with institutions and systems that primarily serve first-generation, low-income, and minority students, this is the area where we face our most formidable challenges. AAC&U may foster “inclusive excellence,” but public policy is actively committed to narrow training for a huge fraction of the nation’s less advantaged students.

Public policy, led by the Obama administration, philanthropy and many state leaders, has focused primarily on “completion” and connecting college to available jobs, with literally no attention to whether students are achieving the learning they need for a fast-changing workplace and economy. The focus has been on “quick wins” in terms of job placement. Governors cheerfully call for higher education to get “butts in jobs” and believe that the magic of online learning can help poorly prepared learners achieve the jobs skills they need. Democracy and students’ personal development are literally off the table when it comes to the contemporary policy dialogue about higher learning.

Accordingly, AAC&U is focusing its Centennial Year on Liberal Education and the Equity Imperative, doing our best to highlight and challenge the “two-tiered” or “separate and unequal” approach to higher education and to build the case that broad-access institutions, aided by digital creativity, can and must provide an empowering education to the nation’s “new majority” –low-income students; working students; racial and ethnic minority students, and adult learners.

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