



# AIM HIGH

*and Make Excellence Inclusive*

Strategic Plan  
2008–2012



Association  
of American  
Colleges and  
Universities

## Mission

*The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is to make the aims of liberal learning a vigorous and constant influence on institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education. (Adopted in April, 1997).*

From 2008 through 2012, AAC&U will work to advance:

- A Guiding Vision for Liberal Education
- Inclusive Excellence
- Intentional and Integrative Learning
- Civic, Diversity, and Global Engagement
- Authentic Evidence

The Five Goals:

### **A Guiding Vision for Liberal Education**

**Champion the Aims and Outcomes of Liberal Education as an American Priority**, to prepare *all* college students for effective citizenship, personal growth, and professional success.

### **Inclusive Excellence**

**Create New Campus Capacity to Support Academic Progress and High Achievement, with special attention to Underserved Student Achievement**, emphasizing a broad institutional commitment to help all students achieve essential learning outcomes.

### **Intentional and Integrative Learning**

**Build Shared Responsibility on Campus for the Aims and Outcomes of Liberal Education**, across all parts of the educational experience and through intentional and integrative connections across the multiple sites and sources of student learning.

### **Civic, Diversity, and Global Engagement**

**Promote Personal and Social Responsibility for a World Lived in Common as an Essential Dimension of College Study**, by supporting civic, ethical, intercultural and global learning, and creating models for engaging diversity, democracy, interdependence, inequalities, and societal challenges in all students' learning.

### **Authentic Evidence**

**Advance Assessment Practices That Deepen, Integrate and Demonstrate Student Learning**, through advocacy of learning-centered assessment policies, support for campus work to develop meaningful assessment approaches, and experimentation with common e-portfolio frameworks.

## A Guiding Vision

AAC&U members will take the lead—within and beyond the academy—in advancing a guiding framework for student success in college learning and for inclusive excellence that centers on the “Essential Learning Outcomes” described below.

### The Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, **all students** should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

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#### ★ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

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

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

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#### ★ 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

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#### ★ 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

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#### ★ Integrative and Applied 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

**Note:** This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. The findings are documented in four publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002), *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree* (2004), *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Achievement in College* (2005), and *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007).

# Making Liberal Education a Shared Priority

“It is time to challenge the idea that simply taking a prescribed number of courses in liberal arts

In making liberal education a widely shared priority, AAC&U works with member institutions, partner organizations, and national and policy leaders to provide:

## Direct Support for Campus Leadership and Action

- By developing **coalitions of leaders and faculty** that work creatively on new ways to achieve the aims and outcomes of liberal education for all students;
- Through ongoing programs that provide campus leaders, faculty, and staff with **resources, evidence, exemplars, and opportunities for dialogue** to strengthen educational focus, curriculum, vitality, and student learning outcomes on campus;
- Through **grant-supported campus-based initiatives** that develop leadership models, resources, and momentum for achieving selected liberal education outcomes for today's students;
- By developing frameworks and tools to support **research** on educational progress and effectiveness.

## High-Profile National Leadership

- Through **national advocacy** for liberal education and the essential learning outcomes it provides;
- Through new forms of **presidential leadership** for an inclusive, public-spirited, and empowering liberal education;
- By providing **research, resources, and examples** of effective educational practice;
- By creating a **resource hub** for practices that support academic progress and higher levels of achievement on essential learning outcomes for underserved students;
- Through **collaborations** to develop models for general education and for learning in key disciplines and professional fields that address and foster the aims and outcomes of liberal education.

and sciences fields is sufficient.” — *College Learning for the New Global Century*

### Partnerships in Selected States to Advance and Strengthen Liberal Education, through

- **Public advocacy and campus action** to help *all* students achieve the essential aims and outcomes of liberal education;
- State-level work and **models** to align general education policies and designs with the essential learning aims and outcomes;
- State-level models for **aligning P-16 planning** and leadership development to raise student achievement on the essential learning outcomes;
- State-level initiatives to raise **preparation and achievement** for underserved students;
- New models for **assessing and reporting** students’ cumulative gains on essential learning outcomes.

### New Assessment Frameworks, Resources, and Evidence

- **Assessment frameworks** to make the evidence of student achievement on essential learning outcomes visible, valued and portable;
- **Research syntheses and reports** about student and institutional progress on essential learning outcomes;
- Research syntheses and reports about educationally effective or “**high impact practices**” and their accessibility and benefit to underserved students;
- **Tools, templates, and models** to support campus based assessment efforts and their use in improving educational practice;
- **Periodic reports to the public** on issues and outcomes related to liberal education priorities.

“While recognized leaders can make higher achievement a priority, faculty and teachers who work directly with students are the only ones who can make it actually happen.”

— *College Learning for the New Global Century*

## Guiding Commitments

### The Interdependence of Inclusion and Excellence

With this plan, AAC&U reaffirms its conviction that quality and diversity are integral and mutually enriching dimensions of an educationally effective learning environment. Building from its longstanding commitment to equity and inclusion, AAC&U will vigorously challenge educational traditions and practices that, historically and today, steer less-advantaged students toward programs that teach narrow skills for an initial job, while more advantaged students reap the benefits and value of a liberal education.

Against these well-documented trends, AAC&U will stand with the LEAP National Leadership Council’s call to “*Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive*” by identifying and promoting institutional policies and practices that help all students, whatever their background or area of study, develop the important outcomes of a contemporary liberal education.

AAC&U will make it a high priority to promote educational practices that can help students from underserved groups and backgrounds—who are, collectively, the “new majority” in higher education—achieve these essential learning outcomes.

### Liberal Education across the Disciplines and Professional Fields

Over the next five years, AAC&U will work vigorously to challenge and change the traditional equation of liberal education with study in the arts and sciences alone, and/or with study in general education alone.

AAC&U will provide advocacy and action to advance the “essential learning outcomes” as a framing for the entire educational experience, as necessary elements in any college education that seeks to prepare graduates successfully for work, life, and citizenship, and as the best standard for student success.

	Liberal Education in the Twentieth Century	Liberal Education in the Twenty-First Century
What	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ intellectual and personal development</li> <li>▪ an option for the fortunate</li> <li>▪ viewed as non-vocational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ intellectual and personal development</li> <li>▪ a necessity for all students</li> <li>▪ essential for success in a global economy and for informed citizenship</li> </ul>
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ through studies in arts and sciences disciplines (“the major”) and/or through general education in the initial years of college</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ through studies that emphasize the essential learning outcomes across the entire educational continuum—from school through college—at progressively higher levels of achievement (recommended)</li> </ul>
Where	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ liberal arts colleges or colleges of arts and sciences in larger institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ all schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities, as well as across all fields of study (recommended)</li> </ul>

Adapted from *College Learning for the New Global Century*, Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, page 18, figure 5.

### Civic, Diversity, and Global Learning—from School through College

While colleges and universities place high value on preparing students for responsible citizenship in a diverse democracy and the global community, the evidence suggests that there is little public understanding of this aspect of college learning. AAC&U will work to articulate and promote a compelling contemporary framework for the preparation students need—encompassing knowledge, skill, choices, and action—to become responsible participants in a diverse democracy and in the global community. AAC&U will highlight campus models that connect this framework with learning in the arts and sciences and in the professional fields.

### Authentic Assessments as a Catalyst for Individual and Institutional Learning

AAC&U will vigorously promote approaches to assessment that are designed to focus both student and faculty attention on the essential aims and outcomes of a college education. While supporting the new calls for greater transparency and accountability, AAC&U will continue to resist—and will provide alternatives to—the use of multiple-choice tests as the primary index of the quality of institutions’ or student’s achievement. The organization will focus on assessments that both foster and demonstrate students’ ability to integrate and apply their learning to complex problems and projects.

### The Central Role of Faculty in Achieving Inclusive Excellence and Authentic Assessment

Faculty have played the driving role in establishing U.S. world standing in higher education; faculty vitality is the single most important determinant of educational quality. Yet faculty have been under relentless attack for decades, both in the press and through funding policies and exigencies that force campuses to turn to adjuncts rather than full-time faculty. The new challenges of achieving inclusive excellence fall on a faculty that feels overburdened and undersupported. AAC&U will remain a strong voice for the importance of faculty quality and vitality in principle and will work actively to foster faculty leadership and creativity in practice. In partnership with faculty, AAC&U will emphasize quality improvements within the regular teaching, curriculum, research and departmental responsibilities of faculty, challenging the widespread practice of improvement through an unsustainable expansion of faculty roles and assignments. And AAC&U will continue to provide rich opportunities for faculty development that feature faculty members’ own curricular, pedagogical, technological, and assessment creativity.

### Integrative and Applied Learning—In and Out of the Classroom

The real test of educational excellence is whether students apply their learning in their lives beyond the classroom. Integrative and applied learning are therefore catalytic themes in AAC&U’s vision of essential learning for the twenty-first century. With these ends in mind, AAC&U will work to advance the importance of the larger educational institution as a crucial laboratory for liberal learning, democratic and global citizenship, and work preparation. AAC&U will work vigorously to promote and expand existing designs for helping students become more engaged, more intentional, and more reflective about the larger implications and applications of their college learning. And, AAC&U will make it a high priority to discover, develop, and promulgate academic and student–life partnerships that help traditionally underserved students achieve—and apply—the essential learning outcomes that are the center of this strategic plan.

## The Historical Context

Two themes have governed AAC&U's vision and work since its founding in 1915: a mission-level focus on the aims and values of liberal education, and a consistent concern with the vitality and integrity of institutions that provide college-level liberal education.

AAC&U's approach to these issues has shifted fundamentally over the past thirty years, however, becoming steadily more inclusive both in its view of who should benefit from liberal education and in its conception of where and how liberal education outcomes can be advanced.

### Origins

Founded in 1915 as the Association of American Colleges, AAC primarily convened and served the presidents of liberal arts colleges. One of its services was federal lobbying on behalf of private institutions. Yet early on, AAC also opened its doors to colleges of arts and sciences in any university, including public institutions. AAC's membership became very diverse over the years, even as it remained the primary membership association for presidents of liberal arts colleges.

### Rupture and Reform

In 1976, following an extensive self-study, the board of directors and members determined that AAC should both broaden and sharpen its mission. Leaving federal representation to other organizations, AAC repositioned itself as a "voice and force" not just for liberal education but for curricular and pedagogical reform throughout the academy.

With this shift, AAC&U became over time a primary gathering ground for academic administrators, faculty leaders, and diversity leaders seeking far-reaching change to strengthen the quality and inclusiveness of undergraduate college learning. By the mid-1990s, AAC&U leaders decided to give new attention to the pressures on academic institutions that some characterized as "doing much more with less." The 1997 strategic plan, therefore, gave equal emphasis to curriculum issues and to the need for new collaborative leadership to help campuses become more "efficient" and "accountable" while remaining "educationally effective." The plan also emphasized diversity and global engagement as civic and educational priorities both for students and institutions.

### Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College

In 2000, with several million dollars of support from foundations, AAC&U moved to position itself as the primary association voice for undergraduate educational quality by launching its signature initiative, Greater Expectations. In concert with a distinguished national panel of educators, a set of competitively selected "leadership campuses," numerous leaders in accreditation and state systems, and partner researchers on student learning in college, Greater Expectations spent the next six years both analyzing the higher education landscape and working closely on issues of purpose and effective practice. The multiple projects and reports that comprised Greater Expectations were used to shape every aspect of AAC&U's work: Web resources, publications, meetings, leadership institutes, and subsequent funded initiatives.

The signature report from this initiative, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, provided the framing for AAC&U's next strategic plan, approved in 2002 and effective through 2007.

### Reclaiming Liberal Education (LEAP)

The 2002-2007 strategic plan also addressed the general confusion that surrounds discussions of “general or liberal education” and the “liberal arts,” and made it a priority to engage both the public and campuses with the meaning and value of liberal education. AAC&U **began to define liberal education, not in terms of particular disciplines or types of institutions, but rather in terms of “essential aims and outcomes” that include but are not limited to the traditional arts and sciences disciplines and their objects of study.**

In 2005, AAC&U's Board of Directors decided to give new visibility to the “case for liberal education” by launching a centennial initiative—titled Liberal Education and America's Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College, or LEAP. In announcing LEAP, AAC&U pledged to work at least through 2015, its centennial anniversary, to:

- Spark public debate about the kinds of knowledge, skills, and values needed to prepare today's students—from school through college—for an era of greater expectations in every sphere of life;
- Challenge the widespread belief that students must choose either a practical education or a liberal education;
- Make visible the inherent inequities in practices that steer low-income students to college programs that teach narrow job skills while more advantaged students reap the full benefits of a first-rate liberal education;
- Document national and state progress in providing every student with access to a high-quality education that develops intellectual and ethical capacities; expands cultural, societal, and scientific horizons; cultivates democratic and global knowledge and engagement, and prepares graduates for successful participation in a dynamic and rapidly evolving economy;
- Work in selected states to create and implement action plans—organized in partnership with both employers and public schools—to help college and college-bound students understand, prepare for, and achieve a challenging, public-spirited, and practical liberal education.

**These developments significantly influence the perspectives and strengths AAC&U now brings to its educational goals from 2008 through 2012:**

- A Guiding Vision for Liberal Education
- Inclusive Excellence
- Intentional and Integrative Learning
- Civic, Diversity, and Global Engagement
- Authentic Evidence

## The Environmental Context

AAC&U's priorities for 2008–2012 are significantly guided by its history and by the commitments it has already made to the LEAP campaign. But in shaping its goals and priorities, AAC&U also must take into account the contemporary educational environment, especially as that environment intersects with AAC&U's commitment to educational quality, inclusive excellence, and higher levels of student success. In addition, because of its mission, the association also must give special attention to developments—positive and negative—that affect the standing and value placed on liberal education.

Some of the most salient features of this educational environment are presented below:

### Broad Trends Confronting Higher Education

- Rise of a knowledge economy, with U.S. prosperity dependent on continued global leadership in “high-end” innovation, science, technology, and creative industries;
- A related pressure to bring twice as many students to college level attainment (60% of the population vs. about 30% in the recent past);
- Growth in the proportion of the college population coming from traditionally underserved, underprepared demographic groups, specifically low-middle income or low-income families and racial and ethnic minorities;
- Multiple institutional enrollments and extended time to degree for the majority of college students and graduates;
- A strong policy focus on preparation, access and degree attainment, accompanied by a notable policy silence on what students need to accomplish in college;
- The growing importance of cross-sector linkages, particularly with P–12 and community colleges, for “seamless articulation” and successful transitions into college;
- The emergence of online and technology-enhanced curricula and pedagogies, which further blurs the traditional boundaries between institutions;
- A faculty that is systematically trained for scholarship, but not for creative leadership on the range of issues listed above, and especially not for successfully educating underprepared students;
- The factors listed above resulting in intense scrutiny of higher education (former AAC&U board member and economist Anthony Carnevale points out that expanding college access and success has become *the* primary economic strategy for the United States economy);
- The shift toward contingent and often ill-paid positions for faculty; the declining appeal of academic positions to many talented students;
- The view of higher education as a private, rather than a public, benefit;
- Strong external interest in higher education, coupled with shallow understanding, resulting in myriad unpromising proposals for improving the academy (e.g., standardized testing as the leading edge of needed reforms in the style and effectiveness of education; “career colleges” as the best solution to access for nontraditional students; using Advanced Placement courses and dual enrollment to eliminate a year of college—presumably the “general education year:” standardizing general education as thirty hours of introductory courses to be completed in the first two years, and/or in high school, etc.).

## Trends Related to Liberal Education

- Dawning recognition of liberal education as an asset in a creative economy;  
An audible if not forceful set of voices is now highlighting the links between U.S. leadership in an innovative and knowledge-driven economy and the signature strengths of a liberal education: e.g. cross-disciplinary knowledge, “big picture thinking,” intellectual and communication skills, “thinking out of the box,” etc.
- Emerging consensus on “essential learning outcomes”;  
As AAC&U has documented over the past five years, there is a growing consensus on a set of educational goals that faculty and employers alike see as high priorities for a contemporary college education. These essential learning outcomes all have strong roots in the signature strengths of liberal education, and AAC&U has identified them as the new definition of liberal education in the twenty-first century (See Page 3).
- New employer concern about what students actually learn in college;  
When surveyed about specific “essential learning outcomes,” employers believe, by significant majorities, that higher education should place more emphasis on most of them. Employers give especially high priority to science and technology, global and cross-cultural knowledge, real-world applications and a rich array of advanced analytical and communication skills.
- Policy emphasis on the STEM disciplines;  
The sciences and related disciplines (technology, engineering, and mathematics) stand at the top of the curricular pyramid as a public policy priority. Educators view science and mathematics as part of liberal education. But AAC&U research shows that few outside the academy regard these as integral parts of either liberal or “liberal arts” education.
- The emergence of strong campus-led leadership for civic, ethical, intercultural and global learning—what AAC&U has termed the “Personal and Social Responsibility” outcomes—in the college years;  
These issues are already priorities for AAC&U. Nonetheless, all the research either done or consulted for AAC&U in the past few years reveals an “*also-ran status*” for these educational goals. They are widely espoused in principle, but largely left to individual initiative and choice in actual practice. Despite mission-level commitment to educating global citizens, there is at best faint national leadership for reclaiming the public and democratic purposes of college learning and liberal education.
- The challenge of developing public understanding of liberal education;  
The humanities play an essential part in AAC&U’s vision for a twenty-first-century liberal education. But, efforts to promote liberal education as “imperative” run directly into popular mental models that equate liberal education with the humanities and arts only—i.e., with a subset of the disciplines. These widespread public misunderstandings of liberal education remain a significant hurdle for AAC&U’s efforts to establish liberal education as “essential” rather than elective.
- The difficulty of “tracking” liberal education outcomes;  
There is no national register or index that shows how higher education is doing in actually fostering “liberal education outcomes.”

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## About AAC&U

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).