

A NEW VISION FOR LEARNING

Strategic Plan 2002-2007



Association of American Colleges & Universities

STRATEGIC PLAN: 2002-2007

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.

VISION

AAC&U will be the leading national advocate for providing a 21st-century liberal education at a high level of quality to all college students, regardless of their chosen field or higher education institution.

The Association will work to build widespread understanding, ownership, and effectiveness in addressing the primary aims and best practices of a 21st-century liberal education.

GOALS 2002-2007

- ♦ Articulate and vigorously advance the aims, values, and best practices of a 21st-century liberal education, across the educational experience;
- ♦ Promote global and U.S. diversity knowledge as intellectual and ethical pathways to students' liberal learning and civic responsibility;
- ♦ Foster principled and collaborative leadership for engaged, inclusive, and powerful learning environments;
- ♦ Stimulate widespread interest in the quality and level of college students' preparation for, participation in, and cumulative accomplishment through liberal education in both arts and sciences and professional fields.



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PRIORITIES

In serving the higher education community, AAC&U will work to foster:

- ♦ **Broad Campus Ownership of Liberal Education**

Wider understanding and ownership of 21st-century liberal education throughout the academy, and a deeper engagement with practices—from school through college—that produce it.

- ♦ **Public Engagement With Liberal Education**

An enriched dialogue and concerted action between the AAC&U community and selected publics to build broader understanding of liberal education's benefits—to individuals and society—and to reinvigorate the practice of liberal education.

- ♦ **Curricular Purpose and Vitality**

An increase in purposeful "New Academy" campus plans—responsive to diverse missions and to the increase in student transfer—for fostering students' liberal learning from cornerstone through culminating studies.

- ♦ **Learning for Shared Futures**

A higher education enterprise more engaged in fulfilling its civic mission both in a diverse but still highly stratified United States democracy and in an interdependent but fractured global community.

- ♦ **Learning for Science, Health, and Civic Engagement**

Advancement of broad-based systemic reform and innovation to connect science and health education to large public questions where scientific inquiry and knowledge are essential.

- ♦ **Commitment to Faculty**

Enhanced support for faculty engagement and leadership in practices that strengthen students' liberal learning and foster civic engagement and responsibility across-the-curriculum.

- ♦ **Principled and Collaborative Leadership**

Strengthened campus leadership—across traditional boundaries—to align expectations, resources, and reward systems with practices that raise the level of student engagement and accomplishment in liberal learning.

GUIDING COMMITMENTS

As an association, AAC&U will continue to work in a way that expresses our continuing commitments to:

- ♦ Serve as both a voice and a force for excellence in liberal education;
- ♦ Connect the aims and practices of liberal education to the needs of a knowledge-intensive and global society, the civic aspirations of a diverse democracy, and the academy's historic commitments to inquiry, learning, and service;
- ♦ Include and serve member institutions representing all parts of the higher education community in their efforts to create new forms of inclusive excellence;
- ♦ Work with networks of key leaders responsible for educational quality—presidents, academic and student affairs administrators, department chairs, faculty, and diversity leaders—at member campuses;
- ♦ Expand the scope, scale, integration, and sustainability of purposeful educational innovations that enhance student accomplishment in achieving the primary aims of liberal learning;
- ♦ Generate analysis and evidence, campus-based action, and vigorous advocacy to support the Association's goals and priorities.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

At the turn of the 21st century, higher education is caught in significant contradictions. On the one hand, college has never been more valued or sought-after. It is fast becoming for the 21st-century United States what high school graduation became for the 20th century: the widely accepted benchmark for students' educational accomplishment. Moreover, hundreds of institutions and many thousands of faculty members are changing selected parts of their curricula and pedagogy to become more responsive to today's students and more engaged with society.

Simultaneously, however, the academy is under intense pressure from multiple centrifugal forces: the substantial increase in student transfer and extended-time to degree; the growing numbers of underprepared students; the effects of the information explosion and technological revolution; the new significance of globalization and societal diversity; and the rise of "for-profit" providers that seek to market subsets of college curriculum, such as high enrollment courses and/or majors, without investing in the faculty scholarship and educational communities that traditionally have been considered guarantors of quality in the academic enterprise.

While each of these developments has the potential to stimulate new creativity across the academy, many of them also make it much more difficult to ensure that each student experiences a college education of high quality.

The quality challenge is further compounded by the absence of shared agreement about what educational outcomes a college degree is supposed to represent. The public as a whole tends to see higher education as job preparation primarily, and many students arrive on campus holding that view. Within the academy, however, most institutions expect students to develop intellectual skills, ethical judgment, expanded

cultural horizons, and an informed understanding of the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences, as well as preparation for a career. Individual faculty, however, may have given little thought to expected outcomes for student learning beyond their own courses.

With policy, legislative, and trustee calls for "accountability" mounting in their urgency, these divergent expectations about important educational outcomes further complicate the quality challenge. The academy lacks not only good measures for assessing students' achievement but also clarity about what is most important to assess.

There is also enormous confusion—substantive and rhetorical—about how to even describe the goals of college learning beyond job preparation. Some speak of general or liberal education; others of the liberal arts, or the arts and sciences. Even within the academy, moreover, many express the view that a "true" liberal arts education is an option reserved for some and not a requirement for all. This confusion over guiding principles and core educational purposes, compounded by the inherited divide between liberal arts and preprofessional fields, leaves the academy vulnerable to the pull of centrifugal and competitive forces.

These quality challenges shape the context for AAC&U's Strategic Plan 2002-2007. Across the higher education landscape, AAC&U is the only major institutional membership association poised by its history and mission to engage the basic question: "What should students accomplish educationally in college?" Other organizations work on effective teaching and learning, or general education, or campus leadership, but AAC&U has long been distinguished by its persistent concern with the fundamental question: "What does it mean to be an educated person in our society?"

A NEW VISION FOR LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In implementing its new strategic plan, AAC&U will draw from the educational framework articulated in its 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. Greater Expectations describes liberal education outcomes that are important for all college students, whatever their field of specialization or socioeconomic circumstances. Therecommended outcomes, which weave together both academic and employer expectations for student accomplishment, call for students to develop analytical and practical skills, ethical and social responsibility, as well as deep understanding of the social and natural worlds, and ways of gaining knowledge about them. Building from earlier AAC&U reports, the recommended outcomes also address the importance of engaging diversity at home and abroad in achieving a liberal education.

The *Greater Expectations* report provides new direction for AAC&U, however, in proposing six major changes in the ethos and practice of liberal education:

- ♦ A new, national commitment to provide an excellent liberal education to all college students, not just those who can attend elite institutions, and not just those studying traditional arts and sciences disciplines.
- ♦ An end to the “artificial distinctions” the academy has established over time between liberal arts and preprofessional education. Liberal education in all fields, the report contends, should become both intellectual and practical. When connected to significant questions in the larger society, a “practical liberal education” will prepare students simultaneously for participation in a dynamic economy, civic engagement in a contested world, and meaningful lives.
- ♦ An inclusive commitment to liberal education that will require new collaborations with the schools to ensure that students address the recommended liberal education outcomes from school through college, at progressively more challenging levels.
- ♦ Purposeful new connections between general education and major programs. Learning outcomes should be transparently addressed throughout the educational experience, and assessed in the context of students’ advanced work both in general education and in majors.
- ♦ A new emphasis on shaping advanced and culminating programs in the degree-granting institution, given the reality that nearly 60 percent of college graduates now attend two or more institutions while pursuing a degree. Such culminating work would provide students with the opportunity both to strengthen and to demonstrate their achievement of expected outcomes.
- ♦ The creation of a “culture of evidence” about the level and quality of student accomplishment in liberal education.

Because these proposals imply far-reaching change both within the academy and in higher education's relation to school preparation, *Greater Expectations* also calls for the creation of a "New Academy" that models a more intentional educational environment for learning, and easier but more educationally purposeful passage from one academic institution to another. This "New Academy," the report points out, is already discernible in pacesetting educational innovations that can readily be found at all kinds of universities, colleges, and community colleges. The time is ripe to both scale up and connect educational innovations that campuses already support and value.

Building as it does from AAC&U's ongoing work on both educational purpose and institutional effectiveness, the *Greater Expectations* report provides a useful frame of reference for AAC&U's strategic goals and priorities over the next five years. AAC&U's strategic plan calls for AAC&U to focus intensively, both on campus and with the public, on core issues of educational quality: the liberal education outcomes that provide high benefit to individuals and society; what students should accomplish through college study; the threats to quality in an age of "cash and carry" entrepreneurship.

Above all, AAC&U commits itself to champion educational leadership, faculty engagement, and institutional vitality as indispensable elements in educational excellence.

"THE ABILITY TO THINK, TO LEARN, AND TO EXPRESS ONESELF BOTH RIGOROUSLY AND CREATIVELY, THE CAPACITY TO UNDERSTAND IDEAS AND ISSUES IN CONTEXT, THE COMMITMENT TO LIVE IN SOCIETY, AND THE YEARNING FOR TRUTH ARE FUNDAMENTAL FEATURES OF OUR HUMANITY. IN CENTERING EDUCATION UPON THESE QUALITIES, LIBERAL LEARNING IS SOCIETY'S BEST INVESTMENT IN OUR SHARED FUTURE."

(From AAC&U Statement on Liberal Learning, 1998, full statement can be found at www.aacu.org)

AAC&U is the leading national association devoted to advancing and strengthening liberal learning for all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Since its founding in 1915, AAC&U's membership has grown to nearly 800 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.



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