

# THE LEAP CHALLENGE:

## MAKE APPLIED OR “SIGNATURE WORK” A GOAL FOR ALL STUDENTS— AND THE EXPECTED STANDARD FOR QUALITY LEARNING IN COLLEGE

**Definition:** Signature Work describes students’ learning related to a problem or project over at least a semester and often longer. It may include work in and across thematically linked courses, research, practicums, community service, or other experiential learning. It will always include writing and reflection of multiple kinds. **The key idea is that the student takes the lead, with faculty and mentors, in pursuing a significant question and in producing work that expresses the insights and learning gained from the inquiry. Signature Work will show, in sum, what students can do with their learning.**

A second key idea is that students need frequent practice to prepare for signature work.

**Rationale:** As educators, we are preparing students both for an economy that is fueled by successful innovation and for life in diverse communities that urgently need solutions to festering problems on every level: from human dignity and well-being to long-term issues of environmental sustainability. In this context, higher education should help graduates develop the capacities—including investigation, evidence-based reasoning, social imagination, collaborative competence—to grapple with problems where the “right answer” is still unknown and where any answer may be actively contested.

We also are preparing students to navigate in a context of ongoing and often disruptive change, in which their own inner resources – e.g., their sense of purpose, motivation, ethical compass, resilience, and grit—will be important components in their achievement of “success,” in all its multiple manifestations.

**To prepare students for a lifetime of working with unscripted questions—in their careers, in diverse communities, and their own lives—college study should immerse them—early and often—in their own explorations of significant and complex problems, questions that matter to them and whose significance to others they are prepared to explain.** In exploring these significant questions and problems, students should, with guidance from faculty, take the lead in framing the question, exploring the options, engaging diverse views, and producing visible results—whether through research, writing, practicums, service, social media, e-portfolios, or other forms of invention and problem-solving.

**The LEAP Challenge in Brief:** Educational institutions should expect and prepare students to produce “signature work” on one or more problems that matter to the students and matter to society. The problems may be contemporary—issues that need to be solved in a timely and practical way, or they may be enduring and/or personal—issues of values, identity, integrity, spiritual quests, justice, obligations to self and others.

What matters is that each student is expected to devote time and talent to significant explorations—enacted across multiple courses and/or assignments—and to produce signature work as a degree requirement.

Students’ signature work can be assessed for evidence of their proficiency on key learning outcomes. **But the purpose of signature work is much more than assessment. The goal is tapping students’ own motivations—which begin with their own questions and priorities—kindling imagination, making higher learning really matter, and providing opportunities for learning-in-depth that go well beyond the traditional compilation of course credits, grades, transcripts and credentials.**