

Making Excellence Inclusive: Roots, Branches, Futures

IN 2012, anticipating the association's centennial anniversary, AAC&U expanded its mission to encompass both liberal education and the long-term project of making excellence inclusive. This shift was not made lightly. The expansion of our mission built on at least two decades of work to clarify the kind of learning college graduates need most, for a complex world and as citizens in a diverse and still inequitable democracy. It also built on the extensive work that AAC&U has led over the past two decades to help our member institutions, and the higher education community as a whole, create more intentional, hospitable, and educationally empowering environments for the diverse and unevenly prepared students now flocking to postsecondary education.

So what are the connections between liberal education and inclusive excellence? What does the concept of inclusive excellence *add* to the mission of advancing liberal education?

As I look toward the conclusion of my term as AAC&U's president, I want to share my own perspective

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

on these questions by exploring the roots and branches of AAC&U's decision to expand its mission to

encompass both liberal education and inclusive excellence. I take great pride in this accomplishment. But I am conscious that this expanded mission calls us to far-reaching new work. In what follows, I want to share with you, our members, the foundations of our expanded mission and my own sense of the complex and demanding journey that lies ahead.

Inclusive excellence must be anchored in clear goals for quality learning

In a knowledge-fueled economy, it is necessary but nonetheless insufficient to provide expanded access to college for groups previously underserved. It is also necessary but insufficient to focus primarily on whether underserved students are making timely progress toward degree completion. Quality learning is—and must be—the sine qua non for students who place their hopes for the future in the benefits of college.

To be specific, graduates will be poised for longer-term success when they possess—in addition to depth in the fields they choose as specializations—broad, big-picture knowledge of the world they are navigating (physical, cultural, historical, socioeconomic); well-honed intellectual and practical skills that prepare them to deal with the complexity of that wider world; proficiency in integrating, adapting, and applying their learning to complex problems; and a grounded sense of ethical and civic responsibility for their uses of knowledge. The forms of learning that allow students to achieve these outcomes also prepare students to adapt responsively and responsibly to change.

Historically and substantively, this design for quality learning is best described as a liberal and liberating education. But, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, liberal education does not belong only to the liberal arts and sciences disciplines. The hallmark learning outcomes of a quality liberal education can and must be cultivated—in context-appropriate ways—across all fields of study, “liberal arts” and career focused alike.

General education is an important component of a quality liberal education. But general education cannot by itself provide the entirety of a horizon-expanding and empowering education. Rather, to foster integrative liberal learning, general education must work in tandem with major programs and with students' own particular interests, prior learning, and aspirations.

To help diverse learners achieve a high-quality liberal and liberating education, we must seek ways to cultivate the hallmark liberal learning outcomes within the career-attentive fields of study that most

students choose and through dramatically improved approaches to general education. Addressing liberal education goals and learning outcomes across the entire educational experience is a bedrock issue for AAC&U. But many in higher education do not necessarily grasp this part of the inclusive excellence agenda, continuing to treat general education and liberal education as one and the same. The project of advancing quality liberal learning across the entire educational experience remains a work in progress. It needs to become an urgent priority.

Quality learning necessarily includes diversity learning

A liberal education is characterized by enduring goals—fostering broad learning, developing the powers of the mind, cultivating ethical and civic responsibility, preparing learners to put knowledge to use. But liberal education is not static. It has become and remained America’s premier higher education tradition because it has constantly adapted its practices to the needs of a changing world.

In our time, some of the most powerful changes in the substance and pedagogy of liberal education have been driven by deep engagement, both with the diversity and pluralism of our world and also with the tensions between Americans’ professed aspirations to democratic justice and the persistence of deep disparities and exclusions within the United States as well as within other societies.

Together, these explorations have led to a new understanding that, in a diverse and still divided democracy, a quality college education must build capabilities that graduates need, not just to navigate a diverse world, but to help create more just, equitable, and inclusive communities. To be specific, given the diversity of our democracy, given the United States’ historic commitment to the values undergirding democracy, and given the inevitable intersection with the global community, a quality education for our time must include rich learning about cultural and societal diversity, including one’s own (typically multiple) sources of identity and community; exploration of the connections between democratic principles of equal dignity and opportunity and the restless quests for “justice-seeking” and expanded social power that have long characterized US democracy and societal movements around the world; and experiences that deliberately build students’ capacity to work productively and collaboratively across differences of many kinds, not just to “understand” our challenges but to help create positive solutions for a shared future.

Diversity learning described in this way builds needed capacities for the workplace and the economy. Indeed, in the two most recent AAC&U surveys, employers have listed “problem solving with people whose views and experiences are different from one’s own” as the very top goal for college learning.

College must prepare students to help create just and inclusive communities

But diversity learning also needs to engage the public problems we face as a democracy and in the global community. AAC&U affirmed this strongly through its work in the 1990s, and built civic learning directly into its LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes at the start of the twenty-first century. We also strongly influenced the inclusion of civic learning and engagement with diverse perspectives into Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile.

Collectively, against a long-term trend toward seeing college only as a source of private benefit and financial “return on investment,” AAC&U has sought to help higher education affirm that all students ought to graduate prepared and inspired to take responsibility for the quality of our shared futures—in the workplace, in the community, and in their own personal contexts.

Conversely, college learning lacks quality when it does not intentionally prepare students with the knowledge and skills required for a diverse and still inequitable world and for their roles in civil society. This is easily stated but not widely understood. In the same way that our society likes to think of itself as post-racial, many like to think of quality learning as diversity opaque or diversity optional. There is

good reason to think that many of those who have embraced the language of “inclusive excellence” really use it as a synonym for compositional diversity. But AAC&U always intended the term to refer to knowledge, skills, and experiences that would help create a more just and inclusive society and that would create better solutions to the problems we need to solve.

Achieving inclusive excellence requires transformative change

Providing a quality education to twenty-first-century learners will require far-reaching and transformative change—deploying both high-tech and high-touch strategies—at the institutional and systemic levels. US colleges, community colleges, and universities will need to make far-reaching changes in their institutional, curricular, and pedagogical practices—including their interaction with communities beyond the academy—to ensure that today’s diverse and diversely prepared students actually achieve an empowering and horizon-expanding education. Those changes will be facilitated in part by the digital revolution, but they will depend for their effectiveness on human judgment, caring, and community.

The needed changes are not just structural. They begin with shifts in the mindsets that have colluded, or at least acquiesced, for the entirety of US history, in systems of marginalization, inequity, and intolerance. The needed changes—in mindset and in institutional and educational practice—already are being made, at virtually every kind of institution. But the pace of change is much too slow.

Indeed, the eruption of campus protests concerning marginalization and aggression against specific groups serves to underline the possibility that higher education may well have lost ground on issues that were front and center in the 1990s: specifically, the recognition that campus climate itself functions as a signaling device to “new” students, with the signals too often indicating that students from underrepresented groups are neither welcomed nor valued.

As early as the 1980s, AAC&U coined and helped promulgate the concept of a “chilly climate” as an obstacle for women and minorities in higher education. But developing the concept is far different from successfully warming the climate. Making excellence meaningfully inclusive is everyone’s shared responsibility, and higher education still urgently needs leadership and touchstones to track its own progress, institution by institution, in meeting that standard. Moreover, there is a worrisome trend toward a radical personalization of college learning through self-paced digital programs that students do largely on their own. This trend risks draining from the educational context all the potential of living and working in diverse and collaborative communities, with a corresponding loss of needed knowledge. To make excellence inclusive, we must ensure that college learning is collaborative, not solitary.

Democracy is disfigured when disparities persist

How did AAC&U build the commitment and the capacity—as a staff and as a community of participating institutions—to envision, advance, and help document higher education’s progress from a community built on exclusive excellence to a community embracing inclusive excellence? It was largely through the AAC&U initiative American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy, and Liberal Learning (1992–2002). Fully as complex in its time as the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative and far better supported by multiple philanthropies, relatively speaking, American Commitments decisively shaped the mindset I brought to my presidency—not just about the substance of liberal education, but about how to gain traction on a huge agenda when one’s wallet remains limited.

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All involved in the initiative knew, of course, that students occupy a “global” world. But American Commitments asked higher education what it could and should do about US diversity and US disparities, with specific attention to the communities and neighbors who were (and are) relegated to the margins of society, notwithstanding our democracy’s formal commitment to such principles as justice, human dignity, and meaningful opportunity.

In 1995, the American Commitments initiative specifically recommended that each student should explore his or her own sources of identity in dialogue with others; learn about US pluralism and the multiple pursuits of justice that characterize this society; work with selected community partners on “justice-seeking,” meaning movements to expand opportunity and redress inequities; and work on contested issues related to societal diversity in the context of his or her major. Those of us who worked on these concepts in the 1990s know how far US higher education remains today from successfully realizing them.

Many institutions have, of course, established “diversity requirements.” But we know from research that significant numbers of students do not think their education helped them learn either about diversity issues or about important questions in their own society. In other words, requiring the study of diversity is not necessarily building capacity to take responsibility for the future of a shared and diverse democracy. Indeed, the current political scene suggests a house deeply divided on the future of US pluralism, even among college-educated citizens.

Nonetheless, the issues explored in American Commitments continued to influence AAC&U’s later initiatives. Through unwavering determination since 2001, and in the face of a funding climate far less hospitable than in the 1990s to diversity and learning initiatives, AAC&U has continued to promote and advance higher education’s capacity to prepare students for a diverse and globally shared world. Some of our most recent work in this area resulted in the national report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*, which was released in 2012 at the White House following a broad mobilization of organizations, scholars, and practitioners to shape recommendations about the future of civic learning across school and college.

The point I want to underscore is that there is a direct lineage between the vision outlined in American Commitments (c. 1995), the vision and recommendations outlined in *A Crucible Moment* (2012), and the substance of the LEAP Challenge, which AAC&U issued in 2015. The LEAP Challenge urges higher education to expect students to work on significant problems and projects during their college studies and to ensure that students are prepared to succeed with problem-centered inquiry and analysis.

**The LEAP Challenge
builds directly from
*A Crucible Moment***

To date, AAC&U has described the LEAP Challenge and students’ Signature Work projects as capaciously (or inclusively) as possible, describing the multiple forms such projects could take, but saying little about the actual substance of the topics students might tackle. Yet, the opportunity is now there for AAC&U members to engage students directly with the public problems we need to solve as a diverse and globally engaged democracy. In other words, preparation to succeed with their Signature Work projects could lead students to work extensively, and with diverse partners, on exactly the kind of civic problem solving that *A Crucible Moment* envisioned.

I warmly hope that, as we envision the future of our work on making excellence inclusive, we will keep in mind that this mission-level commitment was framed and formed through AAC&U’s deep and ongoing engagement with the aspirations of a just and inclusive democracy and with the distance our society and every society must travel to fulfill those aspirations.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER