

## Meeting the Needs of America's New Majority Learners\*\*

In recent decades, higher education has opened its doors wider than ever before, reaching out to embrace students and communities that previously had very limited access or no access at all to higher learning. Today, students of color, working adults, and students from low income backgrounds constitute a new majority in postsecondary education. Helping these students gain a quality college education holds extraordinary promise—certainly for the students themselves but more than is often recognized, for our nation. Because they already are the “new majority” in postsecondary study, these students are now, and will remain, the indispensable talent pool on which America's future depends.<sup>i</sup>

What do these new majority students most need from college? In an economy now fueled by innovation, their readiness to grapple with complex challenges and fast-paced change will be critical to America's future economic prosperity. In a democracy in the midst of tumultuous demographic and cultural change, breakthrough learners' readiness to solve problems across cultural and viewpoint differences will shape the character of American democracy, at home and abroad. In a global community facing daunting difficulties, everyone—not just a fortunate few--needs an education that builds both the capacity and the commitment to grapple with the hard issues we face going forward.

New majority learners' readiness to deal with complexity, diversity and consequential choices will be, in sum, the must-have resource for America's long-term future.

Soberingly, however, the U.S. education record with these new majority students is not good. First generation low-income students, students of color, and working adults are enrolling in two- and four-year institutions in unprecedented numbers.<sup>ii</sup> But far too many never complete their studies. Large numbers of these initially hopeful learners ultimately leave college without the credential, without the needed talent development, and too often, burdened with debt they must struggle to repay.

New majority learners come mainly from less advantaged economic backgrounds. But to this day, successful degree attainment in the U.S. remains stubbornly tied to high family income. Americans from the top income quartile are *eight times* (77%) more likely to earn a bachelors degree by age 24 than those from the bottom income quartile (9%) and *four times* more likely to achieve the bachelors' degree than those in the second lowest quartile (17%).<sup>iii</sup>

Finding a way to develop new majority students' full potential—as working professionals, as civic participants, and as thoughtful, resilient, generative people--is arguably this nation's most urgent postsecondary education priority. In *Leading Academic Change*, Elaine Maimon tackles this challenge head-on.

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Readers will find in Maimon's book an inspiring and immensely useful guide, not just to policy leaders' student success goal of "closing the completion gaps," but to the larger goal of creating educationally empowering environments in which new majority students will *both* complete their studies and *also* gain the breakthrough advantages of a high quality liberal--and liberating--college education.

Maimon's conception of a purposeful and public-spirited liberal education applies directly to students' career interests, and to all majors, including majors whose titles "sound like a job." Whether students aspire to be accountants, or health workers, or the entrepreneurs of tomorrow, Maimon wants all of them to emerge with well-anchored big picture knowledge, transferable intellectual and practical skills, and the judgment to connect knowledge with ethical action.

But to help students actually achieve this kind of education, educators themselves will need to break free of old assumptions about how students should proceed through college. *Leading Academic Change* shows us how.

### ***The Maimon Action Plan: If Success is the Goal, Redesign the Way Students Learn***

What will it take to help the nation's aspiring new majority students go the distance, not just to the credential, but to the expansion of opportunity they both seek and need? And—equally important--how can educators resist the trends already pushing postsecondary education toward a multi-tiered educational system, in which some college students gain what business leaders call the "power skills" needed for leadership and innovation, while millions of others are steered to job training programs keyed to available jobs, but with little or none of the big picture inquiry learning that liberal education is intended to provide?

*Leading Academic Change* speaks directly to these questions and more. Maimon herself is a seasoned leader whose entire career has been devoted to supporting new levels of student success in learning, for traditional learners and new majority learners alike. The primer she provides in these pages combines a transformative vision for the future of U.S. higher education with a wealth of practical wisdom gleaned from a lifetime of influential work on the front lines of educational reform and redesign.

I first met Elaine Maimon over four decades ago in a time when both of us recognized, from different vantage points, that standard higher education practice was working badly, both for the "new" students who were already arriving on many college campuses and for a good fraction of "traditional" students as well. Maimon was, at the time, already widely heralded as one of the founding mothers of what is now called the "writing-across-the curriculum" movement. I, like many in my generation, was rather desperately seeking guidance on how to help career-minded college students with weak academic skills develop the proficiency they clearly needed in writing, evidence-based thinking, and other liberal education fundamentals. We became colleagues and I have been learning with and from her ever since.

Through writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC), Maimon and her colleagues became tireless champions, both for the power of *writing as inquiry learning* across multiple disciplines from first to final year, and for creating assignments and pedagogical practices that would give students themselves a stake in their own development of voice and inquiry power.

WAC was a breakthrough reform in its own right, inspiring faculties across-the-country to recast the foundational writing course and to add recurring practice in inquiry writing to their majors

and writing-intensive senior capstones to their degree requirements. Just this year, my former colleagues at AAC&U reported from a nation-wide study of students' course-based assignments at broad access institutions that students performed better on writing than on the other intellectual skills examined. These researchers credited the writing reforms of recent decades for this encouraging outcome.<sup>iv</sup>

But equally important, WAC both proclaimed and modeled a critical lesson for *all* the proficiencies students need to develop through college studies. The lesson is this: no powerful capability can be developed within the space of a single course. It's not that first year writing courses were a bad idea. Rather, the stand-alone writing course was *insufficient* to the task at hand.

Students, WAC taught the academy, need to practice essential learning outcomes like writing and analytic inquiry again and again, in diverse inquiry contexts, and at progressively more challenging levels, to fully develop their intellectual skills and become adept in applying these proficiencies to new settings and challenges.

The same principle applies to other cross-cutting capabilities like information literacy, quantitative fluency, or ethical reasoning. Each of these liberal learning capabilities needs frequent practice, in multiple learning contexts, including their majors, before students can reasonably be expected to demonstrate and deploy their proficiency.

WAC also sent another important message to higher education, one Maimon has modeled persistently in her own career and illustrates, yet again, in *Leading Academic Change*. The lesson is this: it will take *comprehensive redesign*, not just tinkering around the edges of standard educational practice, to help the nation's aspiring new majority learners reap the full benefit of an empowering education. Practices invented a century ago, like a menu of disconnected broad survey liberal arts and sciences courses in the first two years, and an isolated, stand-alone "major" in the final year, do not work for today's students. In fact, recent research suggests that the chaotic curriculum frequently offered in the first two years of college is itself a factor in the high U.S. drop-out rates.<sup>v</sup>

Education redesign, focused on integrative cross-disciplinary learning and rich in hands-on application, will be, I am convinced, the critical next step in building breakthrough success for today's new majority learners. Both for new levels of completion, and to prepare graduates for the complex challenges they face at work and in the world, that breadth/depth curriculum invented around 1900 will need a resolutely twenty-first century do-over. But that do-over needs to keep the hallmark strengths of a liberal and liberating education centrally in view, with new emphasis on creating connections between broad learning and career preparation, and new emphasis on teaching students to connect knowledge with applied learning and action.

Comprehensive redesign may seem a daunting challenge, to be sure. But the inspiring message of *Leading Academic Change* is that much of the groundwork for the needed redesign already has been done. A core lesson of this book is that educators have all the tools we need—right now—to dramatically accelerate transformative change in the way we educate students, new majority and traditional alike.

***HIPs and More: How to Use the New Evidence on Student Success Practices That Work***

If redesign is the goal, what are the resources in hand? As Maimon shows in detail, a generation of enterprising educational reformers has already been hard at work testing and developing better ways to educate today's diverse and diversely prepared learners. The good news from their collective efforts is that higher education knows significantly more today than ever before about practices that demonstrably do work, both to increase student persistence in college and to deepen student engagement with learning.

One important resource is the family of faculty-led reform movements collectively titled "high impact practices" or HIPs (see box). HIPs, as a group, involve students with inquiry learning about complex questions, challenging students themselves to develop evidence-based answers. When done well, they also include collaborative work with diverse peers, with faculty and often with community-based partners and employers. Finley and McNair's research shows that the more frequently students participate in HIPs, the more likely they are both to persist in college and to report deeper learning.<sup>vi</sup>

Beyond HIPs, there also are numerous other innovative practices that have been empirically shown to correlate with increased student persistence and achievement. This family of institution-level "student success practices includes mentoring, cultural support groups, intrusive advising, data analytics, reforms in remedial education, financial incentives, guided curriculum pathways, and taking a full "fifteen-to-finish" set of courses each term.

### **High-Impact Educational Practices**

These practices have been empirically shown to correlate with higher levels of persistence and deeper learning for all students, with what Kuh terms additional "compensatory benefit" for students from underserved backgrounds. The list below is an amended version of the original set of HIPs identified in Kuh (2008) and central since 2005 to AAC&U's ongoing inclusive excellence initiative, Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP).

- ▶ **First-Year Seminars and Experiences**
- ▶ **Common Intellectual Experiences**
- ▶ **Learning Communities (Thematically Linked Sets of Courses Taken in Cohorts)**
- ▶ **Writing-and Inquiry Intensive Courses**
- ▶ **Collaborative Assignments and Projects**
- ▶ **Undergraduate Research**
- ▶ **Diversity/Study Away/Global Learning**
- ▶ **Service Learning, Community-Based Learning**
- ▶ **Internships and Field Experiences**
- ▶ **Capstone Courses and Projects**
- ▶ **ePortfolio**

But with this wealth of new evidence on student success practices "that work," the design challenge becomes ever more urgent. Absent a huge and entirely unlikely infusion of new financial resources, educators can't (and shouldn't, anyway) just add all these practices as augmentations to the "traditional" undergraduate curriculum. What higher education needs at this juncture are new organizing principles—redesign principles—that show educators how to deploy all these resources for maximum benefit to today's diverse students.

### ***From First to Final Year: New Organizing Principles for High Impact Redesign***

It is in this arena, the search for new organizing principles, that Maimon, who has thought and worked systemically for her entire career, helps light the way. *Leading Educational Change* is, among its other strengths, an illuminating user's guide not just to the most promising student success interventions on the horizon, but especially to how these practices can be woven together in purpose-driven new designs for students' entire educational experience.

Maimon currently leads a highly innovative and starkly challenged broad access university just south of Chicago, Governors State University (GSU). As she explains in these pages, GSU recruits students—traditional age and adults alike—who are "first generation *exclamation point*." By this she means that many of her students not only are the first in their own families to attend

college, but even more challengingly, come to college from neighborhoods *where no one they know has ever earned a college degree*.

You will need to read the entire book carefully to fully appreciate the redesign sensibility that GSU is modeling. In this foreword, I want to underscore GSU's systemic employment of "HIPs" to advance the kind of inquiry-led, big picture, integrative and applied liberal learning today's career-minded students need. As noted above, recent research shows that participation in HIPs (see box) correlates with both higher persistence and deeper learning, especially for students from underserved backgrounds.

As a result, interest in HIPs has become, as some of us have written elsewhere, a kind of "juggernaut" across higher education (see footnote v: Kuh et al, HIPs at 10, etc.). Especially because of their completion benefits, hundreds of institutions and even a couple of state systems have already made it a goal for students to complete one or two HIPs—perhaps a first year experience and an internship or other applied learning experience-- before they graduate.<sup>vii</sup>

But adding a required HIP or two is—let's be candid—still tinkering around the edges of that outdated c. 1900 breadth/depth model described above. It is in this context--in the differences between "tinkering on the margins" and "redesign thinking"--that the GSU reforms provide both educators and students with new design principles, for strong learning and increased completion.

Breaking free of that outdated design for a cafeteria curriculum ("breadth") in the first two years, and specialized but de-contextualized learning ("depth") in the final two years, Maimon's colleagues have created a spiraling core curriculum that deploys HIPs strategically, from first to final year, to ensure that all students participate in inquiry-framed, civic-minded, collaborative, and integrative learning across the entirety of college. Moreover, multiple HIPs are "braided" together in different courses and sequences, thus amplifying their educational power. The whole idea is to erase those inherited dividing lines between "broad or general learning" and students' career interests, and to redeploy cross-disciplinary and integrative liberal learning as an enriching and horizon-expanding context for students' majors and career preparation.

Maimon is the first to say that the model developed at GSU can't and shouldn't just be imported wholesale to another institution. For educational change to take root, each institution must take the time to figure out how to "get it right" for their particular students and mission. Moreover, it would be wrong to assume that GSU is the only institution that has undertaken this kind of comprehensive redesign.<sup>viii</sup> Many two- and four-year institutions are already hard at work on systemic curriculum redesign. The point to be underscored in this foreword is that the organizing principles used at GSU—a first-to-final year design for inquiry and integrative learning, with HIPs staged strategically across that sequence—hold enormous potential for a higher education enterprise that needs to do dramatically better by today's new majority learners.

Different institutions will translate these redesign principles in different ways. But *Leading Academic Change* show educators everywhere how we can—once and for all--replace the outdated and underperforming "breadth/depth" curriculum with spiraled and guided pathways, rich in integrative and career-savvy liberal learning, that are purposefully designed to propel new levels of success for new majority learners and a nation dependent on their success.

Carol Geary Schneider  
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<sup>i</sup> Jamie Merisotis, *America Needs Talent: Attracting, Educating and Deploying the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> The American Academy of Arts and Sciences reports that, in this era, more than 85% of students who graduated from high school had enrolled in college within eight years. Yet in 2015, among twenty-five to twenty-nine-year olds, only 50 % of women and 41% of men had attained a bachelor’s degree. The scale of missed opportunity is sobering. *Top Ten Takeaways About Undergraduates*, Accessed August 31, 2017 at <https://www.amacad.org/content/publications/pubContent.aspx?d=22365>. For additional detail on college attainment, see also Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*, National Summary 2017 (IN: Lumina Foundation, 2017)

<sup>iii</sup> Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey Data on School Enrollment,” (unpublished data, 2013). As presented in Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education and PennAHEAD, Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States (PA: 2015), reprinted in *Step Up and Lead for Equity: What Higher Education Can Do to Reverse Our Deepening Divides* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015). Accessed September 10 at <http://www.aacu.org/publications/step-up-and-lead>

<sup>iv</sup> [Terrel Rhodes and Kate McConnell], *On Solid Ground: A Preliminary Look at the Quality of Students Learning in the United States* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities,2017). Accessed September 10, 2017 at <http://www.aacu.org/OnSolidGroundVALUE>

<sup>v</sup> Thomas A. Bailey, Shannah Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins, *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges: A Clearer Pathway to Student Success* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). The cafeteria college model these authors decry as counterproductive is used also in many four-year institutions and often imposed by state regulation in public higher education.

<sup>vi</sup> Ashley Finley and Tia McNair, *Assessing Underserved Students’ Engagement in High-Impact-Practices* (Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities).

<sup>vii</sup> George K. Kuh, Kenneth O’Donnell, and Carol Geary Schneider, *HIPs at Ten, Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* (49, 4. Forthcoming, 2017).

vi. See, for example, Wilson Peden, Sally Reed, and Kathy Wolfe, *Rising to the LEAP Challenge: Case Studies of Integrative Pathways to Student Signature Work* (Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2017).