



WHAT
LIBERAL
EDUCATION
LOOKS LIKE

What It Is, Who It's For,
& Where It Happens



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FOREWORD

At the Association of American Colleges and Universities, our mission is grounded in the enduring value of liberal education as inextricably linked to a deep and abiding commitment to equity and quality as essential to fulfilling our nation's historic mission of educating for democracy. During this time of increasing polarization and partisanship across the country and around the world, the skills fostered by liberal education—including the capacity to discern the truth, speak across differences, and engage in deliberation with respect to competing arguments and viewpoints—are more critical than ever.

Despite a prevailing national rhetoric that calls into question the value of higher education, in general, and liberal education, in particular, **AAC&U REMAINS STEADFAST IN OUR CONVICTION THAT A LIBERAL EDUCATION OFFERS THE BEST PREPARATION FOR WORK, CITIZENSHIP, AND LIFE.** *What Liberal Education Looks Like* details the ongoing relevance and vitality of liberal education for addressing the most compelling issues of the day, while positioning students for success in a future none of us can fully predict. It is a vision that informs AAC&U's current strategic plan, centered on restoring public trust in the promise of liberal education and inclusive excellence.

I am truly grateful to the many individuals whose voices have shaped this document. AAC&U's board of directors, the Presidents' Trust, and the entire AAC&U staff, alongside institutional and affiliate members from a broad range of associations and every sector of American higher education, have contributed their insights and invaluable feedback. We look forward to working together in achieving our shared objectives.

Lynn Pasquerella

President, Association of American Colleges and Universities



INTRODUCTION



Liberal education is a living tradition whose inherent flexibility and responsiveness contribute to its ongoing vitality and relevance. Responding directly to the signal challenges of our time—challenges that strike at the very heart of our democracy—*WHAT LIBERAL EDUCATION LOOKS LIKE* PRESENTS AN ASPIRATIONAL VISION OF LIBERAL EDUCATION THAT IS CENTERED ON ITS POTENTIAL TO SERVE ALL OUR STUDENTS AND TO RENEW OUR DEMOCRACY. Fulfilling this vision will require a determined effort to rally the higher education community around it and to carry it into the public square. It will also require renewed and reinvigorated commitment to the civic and democratic purposes of higher education. Moreover, it will be necessary to make equity a pervading focus of educational reform and innovation and to ensure that college and university campuses are places of welcome and belonging. And, it will be necessary to address issues of affordability.

The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is to advance the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. *What Liberal Education Looks Like* expresses the vision of liberal education that animates our work with member campuses of all types and sizes across the higher education landscape as we pursue this mission together.

LIBERAL EDUCATION & DEMOCRACY



LIBERAL EDUCATION IS THE FORM OF EDUCATION APPROPRIATE TO DEMOCRACY. Democracy is not self-sustaining; rather, it depends on the sustained engagement of a free people who are united in their commitment to the fundamental principles it is intended to preserve and advance—justice, liberty, human dignity, equality of persons. The task of an education allied to democracy is not simply to help students gain knowledge and skills, but in so doing also to form the habits of heart and mind that liberate them and that equip them for, and dispose them to, civic involvement and the creation of a more just and inclusive society.



In the United States, the founding documents have been added to and amended over time in order to clarify and extend the democratic ideals written into them. The struggle to live up to those ideals has continued as lines marked out by various factionalisms rooted in race or ethnicity or in religious or some other felt identity are drawn, sharpened, erased, and redrawn in a cycle all too common in pluralistic societies. Today, however, a new American factionalism has emerged at the heart of the democratic process itself: where once party affiliation was based on provisional acceptance of a broad political philosophy and the policy ideas that flow from it, political parties now command factious allegiance. Impervious to reasoned argument, scornful of truth and dissenting views, and allergic to compromise, this new politics plays out simultaneously as internecine warfare and media spectacle and traffics in misinformation and incivility.

At such a time, **THE INTEGRAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIBERAL EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY TAKES ON A HEIGHTENED SIGNIFICANCE AND INVESTS LIBERAL EDUCATION WITH A RECUPERATIVE POWER.**

In the face of political and cultural polarization, for example, liberal education can offer a collaborative model of problem solving that demonstrates the value of expertise applied in service to community. At a time when interrupted monologue prevails as the dominant mode of civic and political discourse, liberal education can cultivate dispositions that enable productive dialogue and democratic debate—intercultural respect and openness to change, for example, and attention to what is said in addition to who is saying it. In a “post-truth” era, liberal education can emphasize evidence-based reasoning.



The role liberal education can play in strengthening democracy is not, however, limited to the kinds of interventions in contemporary democratic culture recommended above—restoring civility, promoting dialogue across difference, contesting anti-intellectualism. In a society marked by deep and persistent disparities based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, **LIBERAL EDUCATION OFFERS THE BEST MEANS TO THE DEMOCRATIC END OF UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY AND TO FULFILL THE PROMISE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY.**

Put simply, if the learning outcomes of a liberal education correspond to the proficiencies required for engaged citizenship and for success in the workplaces of today and tomorrow—and educators and employers alike agree that they do¹—then liberal education can unleash the potential of those otherwise most likely to be excluded from full participation in civic and economic life.



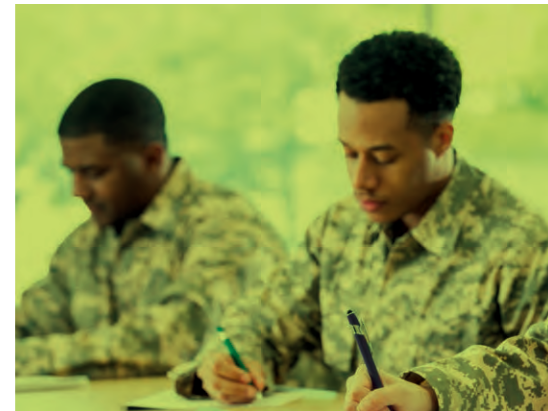
WHAT LIBERAL EDUCATION IS—AND WHAT IT IS NOT



The word *liberal* in the term liberal education is sometimes misunderstood to refer to contemporary American politics, a source of confusion that can be especially problematic at a time of unremitting political and cultural polarization. In fact, like the word *liberation*, it is rooted in *liber*, the Latin word for *free* used to refer to a free person. **A LIBERAL EDUCATION IS A LIBERATING EDUCATION IN THAT IT FREES THE MIND** to seek after the truth unencumbered by dogma, ideology, or preconceived notions. A liberally educated person can think for himself or herself, is both broad- and open-minded, and is, therefore, less susceptible to manipulation or prejudice.

The antithesis of liberal education is not *conservative* education but *illiberal* education—indoctrination, rote and purely instrumental learning, unquestioned transmission of a closed system of thought. **IF THERE WERE, IN THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SENSE, A LIBERAL EDUCATION AND A CONSERVATIVE EDUCATION, EACH INTENDED TO INCULCATE AN OPPOSING POLITICAL OUTLOOK, BOTH WOULD IN FACT EXEMPLIFY ILLIBERAL EDUCATION.** Whereas liberal education is appropriate to democracy, illiberal forms of education are appropriate to authoritarianism and totalitarianism, autocracy and theocracy, and other systems of government that are predicated on obedience and that restrict freedom of thought or behavior, discourage civic involvement, and prohibit or severely limit self-governance.

The relation of liberal education to specific academic disciplines and institutional settings is also a source of potential confusion. While a *liberal arts education* may also be a liberal education, and while a *liberal arts college* may offer a conducive campus setting, liberal education is the exclusive province of neither. The academic subjects and disciplines that constitute the liberal arts serve as highly effective staging grounds for a liberal education, but so, too, can the STEM fields and most professional programs. What distinguishes liberal education is the spirit in which students engage with disciplines and the overarching educational ends toward which that engagement is ordered. **LIBERAL EDUCATION HAPPENS AT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES OF ALL TYPES AND SIZES.**



Through disciplinary study in general education and the majors, a solid undergraduate curriculum provides knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world. What matters for liberal education is that disciplinary study be focused by engagement with “big questions,” both contemporary and enduring. Students also develop intellectual and practical skills—inquiry and analysis; critical and creative thinking; written and oral communication; teamwork and problem solving; quantitative, information, scientific, and technological literacies. What matters for liberal education is that these skills be practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance. Through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges, liberal education also entails cultivation of personal and social responsibility, whose aspects include civic knowledge and engagement at the local and global levels, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and a disposition to lifelong learning. And through its emphasis on synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies, liberal education promotes integrative learning, requiring that students develop and demonstrate the ability to apply knowledge and skills to complex problems and in varied settings.

Liberal education today occurs through a process of encounter. **A LIBERAL LEARNER IS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT AND A PARTNER IN HIS OR HER OWN EDUCATION AND IN THE EDUCATION OF OTHERS**, engaging in forms of inquiry that train the intellect through a focus on real-world problems that draw the learner into relationship with others—extending well beyond student-faculty interaction and traditional classroom settings and into wider communities. These encounters are immeasurably enriched when they are characterized by a diversity of backgrounds, identities, and outlooks among students, faculty, and community partners and when they foreground and develop a global perspective that situates civic engagement and community involvement.

INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE



Up through most of the last century, excellence in undergraduate education was understood as an outcome of a process of knowledge transmission, testing, and grading—a winnowing process used to determine which students could enter and proceed through particular courses of study or go on to graduate and professional schools. Fortunate to enter the process at all, students were regarded as passive recipients of instruction and were largely expected to rely on their own efforts and to rise or fall on their own individual “merits.” A product of a stratified society, educational “excellence” functioned as an engine of exclusion, preparing a college-educated elite for the upper echelons of a relatively stable workforce. Those who rose to the top were hired into professions and organizations where they might reasonably expect to spend their entire working lives and where the same sink-or-swim principle operated to sort and sift, allowing for the promotion of some and limiting the mobility of others.



Already by the end of last century, however, a transformative shift was well underway: *learning* was displacing *instruction* as the *raison d'être* of colleges and universities. This shift coincided with expanding access to higher education and was accompanied by a growing recognition that **RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT LEARNING DOES NOT REST SOLELY WITH THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT BUT IS SHARED BY THE INSTITUTION ITSELF**, which ought to be accountable for the quality of the educational experiences it enables. Previously, testing for reception of instruction could well result in a progressive and unchecked accretion of unsatisfactory course grades that ultimately congealed into a low GPA—an unhappy outcome likely to be attributed to inadequate preparation, lack of motivation, inaptitude, or some other student deficit. Now, by contrast, it is widely accepted that unsatisfactory academic results are at least as likely attributable to poor design or delivery or to other institutional factors. And because it is now understood that learning is not confined to the classroom, that it occurs both within and across a range of curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular experiences—and, for many students, at more than one institution—student learning assessments are being refocused accordingly.



This new centrality of learning, along with a burgeoning of diversity among students, prompted two key questions, the asking and answering of which pointed to liberal education. The first question seems obvious: **WHAT EXACTLY SHOULD STUDENTS EXPECT, AND BE EXPECTED, TO LEARN IN COLLEGE—AND WHY?** The answer, as it has been worked out through consensus on and among campuses of all types and sizes and in dialogue with employers and local communities, is embodied in a defined set of learning outcomes that transcend the variety of institutional settings and major courses of study and whose achievement prepares students to contribute to, and flourish within, the personal, civic, and economic spheres of their

lives and, thereby, to advance the common good. In other words, the answer to the *what* and *why* of undergraduate learning situates the private benefits that accrue to individual students within the civic mission and the democratic and economic purposes of higher education. The expectation is that the use of the knowledge and skills gained in college will be directed according to the habits of heart and mind developed there as graduates enter into relationship with others through their personal and professional lives, through their participation in the civic life of democracy, and through their engagements in the proximate and global communities of which they are a part. In short, the goal of undergraduate learning is to produce liberally educated graduates.



Insofar as they are deemed essential for all students and require concerted development across the curriculum and beyond it, however, the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education challenge the continued primacy of now-outmoded curricular designs and institutional structures. And this, in turn, has led to the second question: **HOW CAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES HELP ALL STUDENTS MEET THE EXPECTATIONS FOR UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING?** Answers to this question are emerging from a new understanding of excellence as an inclusive process, rather than an exclusive outcome. Through the process of inclusive excellence, liberal learners actively engage with knowledge—attending to how knowledge is created, interrogating modes of inquiry even as they apply them, weighing evidence. And indeed, an emphasis on discovery and innovation ensures that liberal learners themselves participate in the creation and extension of knowledge.



Whereas the traditional instructional process furnished the mind with useful information but left the learner untransformed, **THE PROCESS OF INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE EMPOWERS THE LIBERAL LEARNER TO APPROPRIATE THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS REPRESENTED BY THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES, ACTUALLY TO MAKE THEM HIS OR HER OWN.** Student learning assessments are intentionally designed to foster appropriation by providing opportunities for recalibration in support of student success—guidelines to keep all students on track, rather than hurdles only some students can clear. Students today are being given regular opportunities to demonstrate achievement in a range of knowledge and skill areas that cut across their educational experiences and pathways, and assessment results are being used to refine those experiences and pathways in cycles of continuous improvement.



Importantly, inclusive excellence is not a process that isolates students or promotes competition among them. It is, rather, a highly collaborative process in which individual **STUDENTS PARTNER WITH ONE ANOTHER AND WITH FACULTY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS** as they move in and out of variously configured learning communities along pathways that guide them through a liberal education that is oriented beyond immediate postgraduation employment outcomes.



The full breadth of student diversity today encompasses multiple categories, including age, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, national origin, physical ability and disability, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. **BECAUSE HIGHER EDUCATION IS ITSELF A SITE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE IS INHERENTLY ALERT AND RESPONSIVE TO PATTERNS OF INEQUITY THAT STRATIFY THIS DIVERSE STUDENT BODY.**

Indeed, it is fostering a new institutional mindset characterized by vigilant attention not only to *whether* students are appropriating the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education, but also to *which* students are and are not doing so and which are and are not benefitting from educational practices that support student success. **INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE TAKES DIRECT AIM AT EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES AND PATTERNS OF SYSTEMIC DISADVANTAGE—ESPECIALLY THOSE RESULTING FROM HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY EFFECTS OF RACISM.**

A product of an academy refocused on learning, excellence—reconceived as a process, rather than an outcome—holds the potential to function as an engine of inclusion, relieving socioeconomic stratification by empowering an increasingly diverse student body to appropriate the essential outcomes of a strong, relevant, and inclusive liberal education.

What does an undergraduate education ordered to the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education and conducted under the standard of inclusive excellence actually look like in practice? Where and for whom does it happen? To explore these questions, the following section draws upon and synthesizes trends and innovations now emerging across the higher education landscape in order to propose an aspirational vision of a liberal education capable of serving all our students and renewing our democracy.



WHAT LIBERAL EDUCATION LOOKS LIKE



LIBERAL EDUCATION HAPPENS ACROSS AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION—at public and private institutions, large and small; at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, technical institutes, and research universities; at women’s and men’s colleges; at historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges, and religiously affiliated institutions. The best institutional setting is not determined by media rankings, prestige derived from low acceptance rates, or any other exclusionary reputational standard; rather, it depends on the vagaries of student fit. An individual student who would flourish in a small residential liberal arts college setting, for example, would be ill-advised to enroll in a large public research university—no matter how highly ranked or how prestigious.



Moreover, **LIBERAL EDUCATION CAN HAPPEN FOR ANY STUDENT**—regardless of whether or not he or she is the first in the family to go to college, and whether he or she is a traditional-aged student who has just completed high school or a returning adult student; regardless of his or her ascribed or achieved identity and his or her socioeconomic background and citizenship status; regardless of his or her relative level of academic preparedness and whether he or she transfers from another institution. Because an institution where liberal education happens is committed to inclusive excellence, all students are welcomed into an institutional setting that is ready to receive them. Indeed, inclusive excellence emphasizes the institution’s own readiness to support the success of all students over the “college-readiness” of the individual student.

Where liberal education happens, no particular group or individual is excluded or alienated, and the notion of supporting student success entails attention to student safety and well-being. **A TRULY INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING CAMPUS COMMUNITY IS ONE THAT FOSTERS A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG STUDENTS WHO MAY FEEL MARGINALIZED BECAUSE OF SOME ASPECT OF THEIR IDENTITIES.** It also recognizes and enforces a clear distinction between the license to discriminate or harass, which can threaten members of the campus community with physical or emotional harm, and the freedom of inquiry and expression essential to liberal learning, which exposes students to the challenge and discomfort that can result from engagement with values and beliefs, ideas and opinions that differ from their own. Spirited debate and difficult dialogue occur within the bounds set by a climate of mutual respect. Protest, demonstration, and other forms of student activism eschew violence and can themselves enhance learning.

BECAUSE EACH STUDENT IS THE AGENT OR COCREATOR OF HIS OR HER OWN LIBERAL EDUCATION, EACH STUDENT'S LIBERAL EDUCATION LOOKS SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT.

Similarly, because of the institutional diversity that distinguishes American higher education, the curricular architecture and the overall design of the educational experiences that enable liberal education to happen look somewhat different from campus to campus—and, indeed, even within a single campus context.

CONSENSUS ON THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION DOES NOT IMPLY A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL CURRICULAR OR PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH BUT, INSTEAD, HAS SPURRED EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION IN DESIGN

AND DELIVERY. For liberal education to happen at all, however, the expectations for student learning must be clearly defined and shared by the staff, faculty, administration, and trustees, uniting them in common purpose, and the expectations also must be clearly communicated to, and embraced by, the student.

From the outset, even as they consider what major or profession they will pursue, if they do not know already, students are made aware of the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education and that the various components of their undergraduate education—including the major—will be ordered to these outcomes and will contribute to their achievement of them. For example, a student who elects to major in a STEM field—engineering, perhaps—recognizes that a liberal education will make him or her a better engineer by ensuring that technical mastery will be complemented by habitual attention to ethical, environmental, and social implications of engineering design choices. Similarly, a student who elects to enroll in a professional program—nursing, perhaps—recognizes that a liberal education will make him or her a better nurse because clinical skills will be complemented by intercultural competencies that lead to better patient outcomes. A student who elects to major in a liberal arts discipline—history, perhaps—recognizes that a liberal education will make him or her a better historian because knowledge of the sweep of human history will be complemented by scientific and technological literacies that inform the critical exercise of historical understanding in contemporary contexts shaped by scientific discovery and technological innovation.



What's more, **ALL STUDENTS EXPECT NOT ONLY TO BE WELL PREPARED FOR THE PARTICULAR CAREER ANTICIPATED BY THEIR CHOICE OF MAJOR, BUT ALSO TO BE EMPOWERED TO MOVE AMONG JOBS AND EVEN CAREERS—including JOBS AND CAREERS THAT DO NOT YET EXIST.** Further, students also understand that they are being prepared to take their place in the world, that a liberal education will empower them to be informed and responsible global citizens in community and in a wider world that is changing economically, politically, and culturally at a fast pace.

To help them meet these high expectations, students are given regular opportunities to participate in multiple educational practices known to deepen learning and engagement and to promote student success. These so-called “high-impact practices”—designated as such because educational research has confirmed their efficacy for all students, including and especially those from demographic groups historically underserved by higher education²—are among the fruits of the considerable innovation spurred by the paradigm shift traced above. The embrace of inclusive excellence as a process that emerged from, and builds on, the earlier shift from instruction to learning has tended to focus faculty-driven innovation on active and applied forms of problem-centered, inquiry-based learning. As best practices emerge, they are shared, tested, and adapted broadly across higher education. This ongoing innovation is redefining the *how* of liberal education.

LIBERAL LEARNERS NAVIGATE THEIR CURRICULAR AND COCURRICULAR EXPERIENCES WITH INTENTIONALITY, GUIDED AND MENTORED BY FACULTY AND STAFF AS THEY MOVE ALONG LEARNING PATHWAYS THAT GIVE THE LIBERAL EDUCATION OF EACH STUDENT ITS UNIQUE SHAPE. That uniqueness comes to full flower in an immersive, inquiry-based exploration of a significant problem that is defined personally by the student. Typically, these are problems amenable only to provisional solutions, which must be worked out collaboratively by bringing to bear evidence-based reasoning and considered judgment. They touch perennial questions about what it means to be human and include more immediate problems of social justice that are crying out for solutions on campuses and in communities, across the country and around the world.



In grappling with the problem over the course of at least one semester—perhaps in a capstone course or across thematically linked courses, through community service or an internship—the student produces substantial writing and reflects recurrently on what he or she is learning. Here, too, faculty and other mentors provide support and guidance, but the student takes the initiative and his or her own insights are expressed in the tangible results of the project. Called “signature work” to reflect the high level of personalization and individual initiative involved, such a project bears the distinctive imprint of the interests, commitments, and cumulative learning of the student.

While being guided along a purposefully designed learning pathway studded with high-impact practices, the student documents his or her progress by gathering into an electronic portfolio various artifacts that are indicative of his or her best work and drawn from the range of assignments completed along the way. **THE ONGOING CURATION OF THE E-PORTFOLIO HELPS THE STUDENT MAKE SENSE OF HIS OR HER CUMULATIVE EXPERIENCE, MAKING IT POSSIBLE TO SEE—AND TO DEMONSTRATE TO OTHERS—THAT HIS OR HER LIBERAL EDUCATION IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS MANY AND VARIED PARTS.** In addition to showing how and where the student’s time and effort are being directed and what kinds of proficiencies he or she is developing, the portfolio may reveal an emergent preoccupation with a problem or set of interrelated problems that the student is using multiple disciplinary

and experiential lenses to examine and that may become the basis for a signature work project, the tangible results of which form the pinnacle of his or her portfolio.

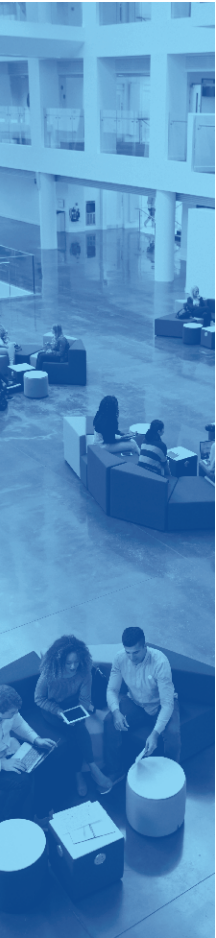
To assess the outcomes of an illiberal education intended not to free the mind but to fill it, to transmit the known rather than to enable discovery, standardized testing is entirely sufficient. If the student can respond correctly to questions whose answers are already known to others and can solve problems others have solved already, then transmission has succeeded. But standardized testing is totally inadequate to assess the outcomes of a liberal education intended to sharpen the intellect and tune the heart through a focus on questions to which the right answers remain unknown and complex problems that are as yet unsolved. This task requires forms of assessment that are intimately related to the process of inclusive excellence itself, that emerge from within it and contribute to it. **TO ASSESS THE OUTCOMES OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION IS TO EXAMINE HOW ADEPT STUDENTS ARE AT INTEGRATION ACROSS DISCIPLINES AND BETWEEN EXPERIENTIAL AND ACADEMIC LEARNING AS WELL AS TO EVALUATE DIMENSIONS OF THEIR FORMATION AS GLOBAL CITIZENS AND PROBLEM-SOLVERS.** And because of the intimate relationship between the goals of liberal education and the process of inclusive excellence, the forms of assessment proper to both not only provide evidence of student gains but also yield actionable evidence of the efficacy of the teaching and learning practices that contributed to them—or did not.

FAR AND AWAY THE BEST EVIDENCE OF WHETHER OR NOT STUDENTS ARE MAKING GAINS IN PROFICIENCY IS TO BE FOUND IN THE WORK THEY PRODUCE ACROSS THEIR DIVERSE LEARNING PATHWAYS. Accordingly, the most promising approach is to assess samples of such authentic student work using scoring guides, or rubrics, specifically keyed to the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education. Rubric-based assessment provides a window on the development and application of essential proficiencies over time, revealing growth and maturation for individual students as well as enabling comparisons among students on campus and across campuses, institutions, and states.



For students who have appropriated the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education, have truly made both the knowledge and the intellectual and practical skills their own, **LIBERAL EDUCATION DOES NOT END AT GRADUATION.** Instead, it fully commences then. Liberally educated graduates are poised to take their skills and proficiencies to even higher levels through practiced application in what will almost certainly be highly varied work lives, to pursue their commitment to social justice as global citizens in community, to continue the project of becoming ever more fully human through ongoing engagement with art and culture, to be at ease in a world increasingly shaped by scientific discovery and rapid technological innovation, to play their part in sustaining democracy. In other words, while achievement of the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education is the principal objective of an undergraduate education of the highest quality, the overall goal of a liberal education is truly to liberate the student, ultimately empowering the liberally educated graduate to pursue a course of lifelong learning that far exceeds the bounds of any curricular journey.





FRONTLINE CHALLENGES

What will it take to realize this vision of a strong, relevant, and inclusive liberal education?



FIRST, IT WILL REQUIRE ADVOCACY, A DETERMINED EFFORT TO RALLY THE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY AROUND THE VISION AND TO CARRY IT WITH CONFIDENCE, INTEGRITY, AND PERSUASIVE FORCE INTO THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

While the vision draws upon and synthesizes trends and innovations now emerging across the higher education landscape, the sweeping redesign of curricula and pedagogical practice necessary to enact it fully remains a work in progress. Meanwhile, largely hostile to this vision, the current public and policy discourse tends to isolate and privilege short-term economic benefit and increasingly promotes illiberal forms of postsecondary education—recasting higher education as a private rather than a public good; undermining its broader civic, democratic, and cultural aims; reducing sharply the expectations of students and other stakeholders; and, ultimately, threatening to reproduce socioeconomic stratification.

2

SECOND, IT WILL REQUIRE RENEWED AND REINVIGORATED COMMITMENT TO THE CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

This commitment must animate the educational mission, be infused throughout campus culture, and be enacted through the relationship between institutions and the communities they serve. As an especially prominent social institution, US higher education has historically been expected to play a role in transmitting democratic norms and values—a role whose importance increases with the size and diversity of the population served by higher education. Yet, despite the decades-long movement within higher education to create vibrant civic engagement and service-learning programs, along with other curricular and cocurricular opportunities through which students can practice the arts of democracy, polarization and civic dysfunction are worsening and the social fabric of democracy is weakening. Realizing the vision of liberal education proposed above will require that colleges and universities be both in and of their communities, that the constituencies of liberal learning be broadly conceived, and that engaged learning experiences on campus and in community advance social justice and global citizenship.

3

THIRD, IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO MAKE EQUITY A PERVADING FOCUS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND INNOVATION, MOVING BEYOND THE GOALS OF ACCESS AND COMPOSITIONAL DIVERSITY TO DESIGN AND DELIVER EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES THAT SUPPORT THE SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS.

Campuses will need to engage in truth-telling conversations about the existence and persistence of inequities, and equity goals will need to be embedded within the strategic priorities of all institutions that seek to provide a liberal education. Data related to student success and the educational practices and curricular structures that support it will need to be tracked and disaggregated to identify trends and disparities in outcomes among demographic groups—and the findings will need to be acted upon. Further, racialized practices that marginalize students of color must be acknowledged fully and confronted directly, and preparation to address structural and systemic racism must be recognized as a core concern of a liberal education. At a time when students of color comprise a large and growing number of undergraduates (currently 45.2 percent),³ the commitment to racial equity must be foregrounded.



4

FOURTH, IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO TAKE PROACTIVE STEPS TO ENSURE THAT COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES ARE PLACES OF WELCOME WHERE ALL STUDENTS ARE, AND FEEL THEMSELVES TO BE, SAFE AND PLACES OF BELONGING WHERE NO STUDENTS ARE, OR FEEL THEMSELVES TO BE, MARGINALIZED.

This will require deliberate attention to conflicts that may arise between the commitment to inclusion and civility and the commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression. It will also require a pace of institutional change that is adequate to respond to the needs of a changing student population, which may include students who are food or housing insecure, for example, or who are working, parenting, or coping with mental health or psychosocial issues.



5

FIFTH, IF THE EMERGING VISION OF LIBERAL EDUCATION DESCRIBED HERE IS TO BE FULLY REALIZED, IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF AFFORDABILITY.

For many students and families, higher education is increasingly out of reach. What a student pays for an undergraduate education is too often more than he or she can afford, on the one hand, and less than what it costs the college or university to provide it, on the other. This untenable situation contributes to an escalating and unconscionable student debt burden, and it threatens the fiscal stability and, in some cases, the continued viability of individual colleges and universities. It also creates an opening for educational providers who seek to lure students away from institutions where liberal education happens by making false promises of return on investment, and it undermines the public standing of higher education—which, in turn, compounds the problem by eroding support for public investment in higher education.



NOTES

1. See, for example, Hart Research Associates, *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work, Selected Findings from Online Surveys of Business Executives and Hiring Managers* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018). This report presents findings from the latest in a series of national public opinion surveys and focus groups conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in order to canvass the views of employers and others with regard to the outcomes of college-level learning and the expectations of college graduates in the workplace.

2. The term “high-impact practices” refers to teaching and learning practices that have been widely tested and shown to be beneficial for college students from many demographic groups. These practices, which take various forms depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts, include the following: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, e-portfolios, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects.

3. The latest data on race and ethnicity in higher education demonstrate that “people of color make up a larger share of postsecondary students than ever before. Between 1996 and 2016, the non-White share of undergraduates grew from 29.6 percent to 45.2 percent....” Lorelle L. Espinosa, Jonathan M. Turk, Morgan Taylor, and Hollie M. Chessman, *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2019), 45.







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