

# The Quality Imperative

Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment  
with an Ambitious Vision for Learning

A Statement from the Board of Directors of the  
Association of American Colleges and Universities





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Association of American Colleges and Universities

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# The Quality Imperative: Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment with an Ambitious Vision for Learning

## Introduction

Facing an avalanche of evidence that the United States no longer leads the world in postsecondary attainment, educational leaders at all levels have begun a far-reaching effort to increase significantly the number of students entering and completing higher education. This is a top priority for the Obama administration, for policy leaders and philanthropy, and for colleges and universities.

Taken alone, the headline terms “Access and Completion” threaten to perpetuate what this association has long described as a “dangerous silence” on the most fundamental question of all: what do college students need to learn and be able to do?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities welcomes and strongly supports the emerging national commitment to expand appreciably both access to college and successful completion. We are especially concerned that higher education provide equitable access and expanded opportunity for groups and communities that continue to seek full participation in the promise of American democracy.

Taken alone, however, the headline terms for this effort—“Access and Completion”—

threaten to perpetuate what this association has long described as a “dangerous silence”<sup>1</sup> on the most fundamental question of all: what do college students need to learn and be able to do?

The current focus on college-going, while important, short-circuits the core issue of educational quality. Yet both employers and educators know that the quality shortfall is just as urgent as the attainment shortfall. As new research released with this statement makes clear, today’s employers want higher education to place significantly more emphasis on a set of outcomes—outlined on page 4—that range from writing to complex problem solving to ethical decision making, science and global learning, intercultural competence, and the ability to apply learning to real-world challenges. This association strongly agrees.

Public policy cannot simply assume that program completion and high-level student achievement on key learning outcomes are one and the same.<sup>2</sup> Access and completion are necessary but far from suffi-

1 Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002); Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

2 Peter D. Hart Research Associates, *How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning: Employers’ Views on the Accountability Challenge* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008); Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

cient. To regain our position as a world leader, the United States now must work both to increase degree attainment and to improve significantly the breadth, level, and quality of students' actual learning.

Quality must become the centerpiece of this nation's intended investments in postsecondary attainment.

## **Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive**

The Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, on behalf of its 1,200 college, university, community college, and career-technical college members, urges a far-reaching and unprecedented effort to ensure that *all* the nation's college students—whatever their age and whatever their background—receive the finest possible preparation for the demands and challenges of this global century.

Preparing Americans for opportunity and success in the turbulent global economy should be one of the guiding themes for this far-reaching initiative. And, with massive funding expected to flow into both school and postsecondary reform, we need to recognize from the outset that narrow training—the kind currently offered in far too many degree and certificate programs—will actually limit human talent and opportunity for better jobs in today's knowledge economy.

Why is narrow training a barrier to opportunity? In this turbulent and fast-paced economy, employees frequently change industries as well as jobs, and they already are expected to engage in significant new learning across their careers. Moreover, nine out of ten employers say their organizations now look for broader levels of knowledge and skill than in the past, and assign higher levels of responsibility to those they employ.<sup>3</sup> To prepare for these career realities, all students need to develop broad knowledge—of science, society, and global developments—and the kinds of advanced, cross-cutting capacities that prepare them to grapple with complexity, contingency, and new learning in contexts of rapid change.

To prosper in today's knowledge economy, in sum, all Americans will need a contemporary blend of liberal and applied learning. Many colleges, community colleges, and universities already are moving in just this direction as they connect their degree programs with twenty-first-century challenges, but the pace of change is much too slow and seriously hindered by the current economic crisis. Federal and philanthropic investments should help educational institutions and programs build their capacity to ensure that all students achieve the breadth and level of learning that the economy seeks and rewards. Helping all students achieve the essential learning outcomes outlined on page 4 is fundamental to this effort.

## **Invest in the Multiple Goals for College-Level Learning**

Important as it is, economic preparation is not the only college outcome that matters. As a democracy, the United States also needs to ensure that the curriculum prepares graduates richly for the

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<sup>3</sup> Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010).

responsibilities and challenges they face as citizens—citizens whose decisions and judgments will profoundly affect the decency, integrity, and even the sustainability of our shared future.

Across all sectors, higher education already has provided vigorous leadership to establish civic, ethical, and intercultural learning as institutional priorities. But to date, only about half of all seniors make significant gains on these learning outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Public discussions of “accountability” almost never address these essential areas of learning.

As we commit to the importance of college learning for all Americans, we also should commit to civic, ethical, and cross-cultural learning as priorities for every degree program and every student. Anything less will leave too many Americans seriously underprepared for their responsibilities to our democracy, to this nation’s global leadership, and—yes—to the civic, ethical, and diversity challenges that are basic to work in the twenty-first century.

**Narrow training—the kind currently offered in far too many degree and certificate programs—will actually limit human talent and opportunity for better jobs in today’s knowledge economy.**

With unprecedented leadership turnover looming in virtually every area of endeavor, we further need to take seriously the development of leaders at all levels, for our organizations, the community, the state, and the nation. And not least, we also must commit to providing learners with the capacity to pursue their individual goals for their own lives, their families, and their communities.

These multiple goals for education—preparation for work, citizenship, leadership, and life—should apply to all students who are educated in American higher education, especially students who begin or return to their studies in career and technical programs.

A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else. Yet this is what the postsecondary system, viewed as a whole, provides now. And this is what we must work together to change.

## Connect Liberal Education and Workforce Learning

The world is changing dramatically, and designs for learning that have long drawn clear distinctions between liberal education—intended for future leaders—and more targeted job training—envisioned as workforce development—now are obsolete. Today, even highly technical jobs require the high-level intellectual skills, contextual understanding, and ethical judgment that long were identified with liberal education in arts and sciences fields.

<sup>4</sup> National Survey of Student Engagement, *Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within; 2008 Results* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2008). Norman Nie and D. Sunshine Hillygus, “Education and Democratic Citizenship,” in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 30–57. This major study of civic learning found correlations between specific major fields and a reduction of students’ interest in civic participation from college entrance to exit.

## The Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

### Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

***Focused** by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring*

### Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

***Practiced extensively**, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance*

### Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

***Anchored** through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges*

### Integrative and Applied Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

***Demonstrated** through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*

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Reprinted from Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), 12. This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. For more information, please visit [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).

## Percentage of Employers Who Want Colleges to “Place More Emphasis” on Essential Learning Outcomes

### Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

• Science and technology	70%
• Global issues	67%*
• The role of the United States in the world	57%
• Cultural diversity in the United States and other countries	57%
• Civic knowledge, participation, and engagement	52%*

### Intellectual and Practical Skills

• Written and oral communication	89%
• Critical thinking and analytic reasoning	81%
• Complex problem solving	75%
• Teamwork skills in diverse groups	71%*
• Creativity and innovation	70%
• Information literacy	68%
• Quantitative reasoning	63%

### Personal and Social Responsibility

• Ethical decision making	75%
• Intercultural competence (teamwork in diverse groups)	71%*
• Intercultural knowledge (global issues)	67%*
• Civic knowledge, participation, and engagement	52%*

### Integrative and Applied Learning

• Applied knowledge in real-world settings	79%
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Note: These findings are taken from *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn*, a survey of employers conducted for AAC&U by Hart Research Associates and published in 2010. For a full report on this survey and related employer findings, see [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).

\*Starred items are shown in multiple learning outcome categories because they apply to more than one.

To help students meet twenty-first-century challenges, the United States needs to engage in a far-reaching effort to ensure that *all* degree programs—in liberal arts, technical, and professional fields alike—address the learning outcomes that both educators and employers recognize as essential (see p. 4).<sup>5</sup> Helping all students achieve these outcomes will be the defining work for liberal education in the twenty-first century.

It would be a tragedy—and a massive failure of vision for our future—if the new investments in postsecondary access flow mainly to programs that provide narrow training or short-term credentials apart from these larger aims of a twenty-first-century education. We have long since recognized the inequities that vocational versus academic tracking created in our public schools. It is time now to focus on making excellence inclusive in higher education as well.

New investments should help our society set twenty-first-century standards for the meaning of a degree and ensure that, whatever a student’s pathway into higher education, that pathway helps build the broad knowledge, high-level skills, and grounded sense of responsibility that Americans need in every area of endeavor: work, citizenship, and the challenges of daily life. It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others.

**It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others . . . Access to educational excellence is the equity challenge of our time.**

In particular, new investments should create clear linkages between short-term training programs and

degree programs that carry long-term value in the economy and in our democratic society. Programs that provide job-specific and short-term training will continue to be needed, but such programs now need to be transparently connected to the intended learning outcomes and curricular requirements for high-quality associate’s and bachelor’s degrees.

The time is right and the need is urgent to provide a horizon-expanding education to all who participate in our educational system—in school, in community college and career-technical institutions, and in four-year colleges and universities, public and private. Access to educational excellence is the equity challenge of our time.

## What It Will Take

To succeed in this landmark effort, educators and stakeholders will need to do the following:

**Acknowledge the inequities.** Recognize and confront the systemic arrangements that now impede access to a horizon-expanding education for far too many Americans, including many of those who are now obtaining a postsecondary degree or certificate. Set guidelines for new investments that make academic versus vocational tracking a relic of the past.

<sup>5</sup> For employers, see notes 2 and 3 above. For educators, see Hart Research Associates, *Learning and Assessment: Trends in Undergraduate Education* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009); Hart Research Associates, *Trends and Emerging Practices in General Education* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009). The results from the AAC&U member survey underscore the importance educators across all kinds of institutions assign to the essential learning outcomes.

**Set twenty-first-century goals.** Embrace a set of powerful learning outcomes—outlined on page 4—that both educators and employers have already determined to be *essential*. Organize and align educational reform efforts, across school and all forms of postsecondary education, to help all graduates achieve them.

**Break free of the silos.** Develop a comprehensive approach to student achievement that fosters new and transforming connections between and among school, college, and work; two- and four-year institutions; technical and liberal education; arts and sciences and professional programs. Ensure that all fields of study help students achieve demonstrable competence in the essential learning outcomes, including the ability to apply their learning to new settings and unscripted problems.

**Focus on what students actually do.** Across school and college, direct resources toward “high-effort/high-impact” educational practices that—research shows persuasively<sup>6</sup>—support *both* student persistence *and* student achievement of essential learning outcomes. Expand accountability frameworks to ensure that the curriculum provides extensive opportunities for students to work on—and develop skill in addressing—complex problems, significant questions, and real-world applications.

**Work systemically.** Foreground collaborative efforts—national, regional, and local—to advance a shared framework for accomplishment that embraces all students, whatever their background, choice of major, or postsecondary institution. Build institutional, faculty, and, in public institutions, system capacity at all levels to help students meet these goals.

**Build public understanding and will.** Use every available venue—from the White House to social networking—to shape new understandings, not just of the importance of college, but about how to reap the full benefit of college for individuals, the economy, and our democracy.

## Conclusion

The quality of individuals’ actual learning is the most important resource we have as a society. To build a global future, the United States must erase the educational dividing lines that were designed long ago for a far more parochial and socially stratified world.

It is not just wrong but risky to provide a 360-degree education to some Americans and a much more blinkered form of training to others. A great nation needs and deserves more.

In today’s far more competitive global environment, we must work together toward standards that, once and for all, make excellence truly inclusive, not just in the schools, but in postsecondary education as well. Quality must drive our commitment to college completion, both for the economy and for our future as a great democracy.

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<sup>6</sup> George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008); Lynn Swaner and Jayne Brownell, *Outcomes of High-Impact Practices for Underserved Students: A Review of the Literature* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009), available online at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).

## A Guide to Frequently Confused Terms

**LIBERAL EDUCATION\*:** An approach to college learning that seeks to empower individuals and prepare them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in at least one specific field of study. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, strong cross-disciplinary intellectual and practical skills (e.g., communication, analytical and problem-solving skills), and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

**LIBERAL ARTS:** Specific disciplines (e.g., the humanities, sciences, and social sciences).

**LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE:** A particular type of institution—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, while grounding its curriculum in the liberal arts disciplines.

**ARTES LIBERALES:** The *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), which together form the historical basis of the modern liberal arts.

**GENERAL EDUCATION:** The part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual, civic, and practical capacities. General education can take many forms, and increasingly includes introductory, advanced, and integrative forms of learning.

*Adapted from Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a National Goes to College (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002).*

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*\*Seventy-six percent of employers would recommend this approach to college-bound students, according to a survey of employers conducted for AAC&U by Hart Research Associates and published in 2007. For a full report on the survey and its complete findings, see [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).*





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AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises 1200 member institutions—including 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](http://www.aacu.org).

