What Happens to Quality in an Age of Disruption?

Money Smothering People in Higher Education
Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Challenging Times
Policy Priorities for Accreditation Put Quality College Learning at Risk Against Being Inclusive
The Continuous Death and Resurrection of the Liberal Arts
The Information Literacy Imperative in Higher Education
Leveraging Innovation in Science Education
If educators’ vision and judgment are to guide quality assurance practice, the time to articulate and stand behind essential goals for an empowering college education is now.

Carol Geary Schneider
From 1818 R Street NW

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Quality, Inequity, and Disruptive Innovation*

With telling clarity about the tiered assumptions that shape American education at all levels—a century ago, as today—Woodrow Wilson famously offered the following to a 1909 meeting of educators: “We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks.”

Today, as we plunge forward in this new era of innovation and digital possibility, we need to ask who is going to benefit, and who will be left behind, in this exuberantly heralded season of “disruptive” change, “do it yourself” competency learning, unbundled credentials, and profit-seeking “alternative providers.”

The choice before us is this: Will we shape our digital and other innovations to create a genuinely empowering and liberating education for all those who seek postsecondary learning, whatever their background, income, race, or ethnicity? Or will we continue as a society to do what we have always done: provide high-quality education to the most fortunate, while providing thin, narrowly construed “credentials” to “another class of persons” who must “fit themselves” for a very limited future?

Making excellence inclusive rather than exclusive will require revolutionary change, not just in our practices but also in our mindsets. And the jury is out on whether American society will rise to that opportunity.

Fortunately, higher education can now tackle the work of connecting equity, quality, and innovation with tools that educators did not have even a decade ago. For example, the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and widely endorsed by both educators and employers, provide a clear reference point for what all students need to accomplish in college, whether through online or face-to-face studies. They describe learning goals, such as critical inquiry, problem solving with diverse peers, and ethical reasoning, that are just as important for career and technical students as they are for students in the liberal arts and sciences. They, like the Degree Qualifications Profile developed by Lumina Foundation, underscore the crucial point that we are preparing graduates both for civic participation and for continuous learning across their careers.

We also have a compelling new body of evidence—drawn from over two decades of experimentation with better ways to educate today’s diverse students—about what works to help students achieve expected learning. This research shows educators how they can significantly increase persistence and degree completion. It also provides guidelines on how to help underserved students—including those who are low income, minority, working, or adult—achieve the kinds of learning that educators and employers consider essential, and which democracy needs as well.

Evidence drawn from hundreds of thousands of student reports shows the educational effectiveness of a set of “high-impact practices,” which include both experiential and applied learning—internships, service learning, diversity initiatives—and rigorous course-based practices such as extensive writing, undergraduate research, peer projects, and capstone work.
These new tools and the research that influenced their design can provide guideposts as we face the wild new frontiers of exponential innovation. They also can help us see which “innovations”—notwithstanding the hype that surrounds them—fall far below the standard of what works either for quality or for equitable access to opportunity. Here are a couple of them that are ripe for repudiation.

First are the so-called “competency-based” courses—offered by some traditional educators and, more noisily, by profit-oriented alternative providers—that simply package up content coverage along with multiple-choice tests in a do-it-yourself format.

To be clear, this is by no means an indictment of all competency-based learning, which in principle I support. The problem courses I have in mind include no writing, no analysis, no applied learning, and, in fact, no assignments of any kind. Their authors declare that students have achieved competency when they complete a package of multiple-choice tests. But the only competency being developed is that of sharpening one’s skills at memorizing the right answer from a text closely linked to the assessment.

Some entrepreneurs have said that these practices are no worse than a lot of what goes on in traditional classrooms, which may be true. But there is abundant evidence that significant numbers of learners in those same traditional classrooms are falling behind on the most fundamental qualities of a good education, like writing, critical inquiry, and evidence-based reasoning. It’s high time for educators to insist that the digital revolution should build on our best practices, not on mislabeled content packages that only pretend to foster the achievement of competencies.

The second “innovation” that falls way short of the quality/equity standard is the notion of “unbundling the curriculum” into a kind of cybershopping cart, with the student on her own to determine, from a digital universe of possibilities, which set of courses will best prepare her for a complex and innovation-framed future.

Those who envision a university of everywhere and anywhere have not spent a lot of time working with underserved students. Nor are they using the new evidence on what works—and what doesn’t—for all those learners now flocking to higher education.

What the research tells us is that underserved students need mentors, a supportive community, financial aid, caring and culturally competent instructors, well-sequenced programs, high-impact projects and assignments, contact with peers, smart advising, and proactive, even intrusive guidance to help them stay on course—while they also juggle highly stressed and often impoverished lives beyond college.

The research also tells us that the more fragmented and incoherent the educational experience, the more likely the stressed learner is to drop out. “Unbundled” means further fragmented, and fragmentation is a design for failure. It’s time to call unbundling what it is: reliably destructive, not inventively “disruptive.”

Today, as never before, Americans are looking to postsecondary learning as their best hope for the future. And today, as never before, we have new clarity, as well as promising innovations, about how to make college learning once and for all inclusive rather than exclusive. The choices between a liberating or a narrow education will shape the future of underserved learners—and the future of democracy as well.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

*An earlier version of this essay appeared in the September 14, 2015, edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education under the title “Winners and Losers of Innovation.”
If a new college graduate lands a good job with a high salary, does that mean her college education was better than that of another new graduate who doesn’t find a job in his field right away, chooses to do something other than enter the workforce—going on to graduate school, for example—or enters a profession that pays relatively poorly? The answer depends on expectations, on the standard applied. If economic return on investment, or ROI, is the standard by which the “value” of college is judged, then the answer may appear to be yes. After all, college can be very expensive.

This issue of Liberal Education explores the larger question of the “value” of a college education and what quality means, in institutions of higher education and in terms of policymakers’ calls for accountability. Both Clifford Adelman and Carol Geary Schneider argue forcefully against the narrow ROI definition of value and quality described above. Adelman calls on the higher education community to “reject any interpretation of the outcomes of higher education in terms of future earnings” and to “demand that the US Department of Education remove the variable of future mean earnings from its ‘college scorecard.’” This demand is especially urgent because, as Schneider warns, “it is entirely possible to envision a state of affairs in which, thanks to federal policy, ROI data will displace evidence of achievement of learning outcomes entirely.”

This is not, of course, to suggest that college shouldn’t prepare students for success in their chosen careers, but rather to push back on the notion that comparisons of entry-level earnings can tell us anything meaningful about educational quality. They cannot. So how, then, is college to be evaluated? Authors in this issue argue for a focus on students’ demonstrated accomplishments in terms of clearly articulated expectations for quality learning—expectations rooted in a set of outcomes that represent what a college graduate needs to know and be able to do in order to flourish in all aspects of life, not just at work.

“The good news,” Schneider points out, “is that US higher education does have—right now—clear expectations for what counts as quality learning.” What’s more, as several years’ worth of AAC&U research clearly demonstrates, they largely match employers’ expectations for the kinds of learning needed for career success. The bad news? There is a lack of leadership from those with primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of learning: accreditors.

Debra Humphreys and Paul Gaston provide a review of the current state of the accreditation system, examine various proposals for reforming it, and point to promising opportunities for accreditors to build on the achievements of the learning outcomes movement. “The most constructive, influential, and, indeed, game-changing initiative accreditors could take on is . . . that of clarifying expectations concerning learning outcomes,” they suggest. “No undertaking lies closer to the heart of the academic mission. And none has greater potential for informing public understanding and improving student success.”

Finally, it’s worth observing that the contest between simplistic and distortional metrics, such as those of the Department of Education’s College Scorecard, on the one hand, and the consensus on what counts as quality learning that has emerged among educators and employers, on the other, is taking place in a broader context set by the potential for technology to “disrupt” higher education as it has so many other enterprises. (Think, for example, of Uber “disrupting” the taxi industry or Airbnb the hotel industry.) The advent of the virtual DIY college in which students are totally atomized, faculty are unnecessary, and learning quality is dubious may threaten to disrupt the business model of higher education and originate innovations that influence practice at traditional institutions. But it would be difficult, at best, to argue that this development is anything other than a potential disaster for quality—provided, that is, “quality” refers to the higher learning all today’s students need and deserve.—DAVID TRITELLI
Lynn Pasquerella to Become AAC&U’s 14th President

The AAC&U Board of Directors has named Dr. Lynn Pasquerella as the next president of the association, effective July 1, 2016.

Since 2010, Pasquerella has served as president of Mount Holyoke College, leading a robust strategic planning process and extensive outreach to local and regional communities, as well as to the worldwide network of Mount Holyoke alumnae. She has also focused on ensuring that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds have access to a powerful, engaged, and public-spirited liberal education.

A philosopher and ethicist, Pasquerella has combined teaching and scholarship with local and global engagement. She has written extensively on medical ethics, theoretical and applied ethics, metaphysics, public policy, and the philosophy of law. A celebrated teacher, she has co-taught a class in nearly every semester of her presidency, along with faculty in departments as disparate as sociology, biology, and Africana studies. Throughout her career, she has demonstrated an abiding commitment to liberal education as a force for good, both for the individual and for civic society.

Prior to assuming her current role as president of Mount Holyoke, Pasquerella spent twenty-three years in public higher education at the University of Rhode Island, serving as professor of philosophy and holding a range of administrative positions, including department chair and dean of the graduate school. From 2008 to 2010, she served as provost at the University of Hartford.

Pasquerella began her own education at Quinebaug Valley Community College in Danielson, Connecticut. A first-generation college student, she earned her bachelor's degree from Mount Holyoke College and her PhD in philosophy from Brown University.

Pasquerella serves as a senator and member of the executive committee of Phi Beta Kappa and as host of The Academic Minute, a WAMC Northeast Public Radio program featuring brief faculty presentations on subjects of both scholarly and general interest. She is also an active member of AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) Presidents’ Trust.

Pasquerella is the author of numerous books and articles and has received many distinguished honors, including the Horace Mann Distinguished Graduate Alumna Award from Brown University, the Superintendent’s Award for Distinguished Service to the South Hadley Schools, and the Teaching Excellence Award from the University of Rhode Island.
What, at the end of the day, can the leadership of US higher education do to move away from the money game and to extricate itself from the single-purpose vision of employer control?

The new royal marker for higher education

Somewhere we all learned documentation, whether in laboratories or archives or through ethnographic observation. History is not alone among disciplines in insisting on the use of original sources, but its lessons are most striking in this age of digitally delivered instant reports, scorecards, and analytic flowcharts, along with more painstaking statistical performances, each with a claim to distinctive combinations of controls and methodologies. These activities and their blaring messages are not confined to the research world: foundations, higher education associations, and government agencies are all enthusiastically waving multicolored flowcharts and producing position papers, panel pronouncements, and “summits” at an ever-increasing tempo in a cacophonous symphony. But stop! Remember what you learned about documentation? The symphony may not be so cacophonous, after all. What are they talking about? What does the evidence say? Who owns these pronouncements and conversations? Read the sources, line by line. Listen carefully.

First, the foremost marker of student outcomes in higher education—for the enterprise itself, for the commentariat, and for legislators—has traditionally been institutional graduation rates. Whatever one thinks of the various ways that marker has been produced, and whatever one thinks it means, it has now faded to second place, pushed down in public communication by the marker of how much money graduates make or will make. And however those dollars add up, they are presented as the product of the institutions students attend—not subsequent student behaviors, not labor market conditions, not location(s) of employment. The US Department of Education sets up a scorecard with “how much didja make?” as its governing tone, and the analysts, like lemmings, immediately plunge into the institutional data (whatever its faults and gaps) to judge colleges for this dollar sign or that dollar sign and for each of the standard stale demographic groups (though some are smart enough to include age at entrance to higher education). The economic literature has swelled with this royal outcome variable for higher education for years, and with increasingly sophisticated statistical gymnastics, but now it has burst beyond academic journals and has become an emperor.

The Economist (which should know better, and which scrambles dates so that we don’t know who, precisely, is being assessed) follows the tone with a prediction of earnings ten years after (after something, but we’re not sure after what) by institution, matched against actual earnings ten years later, by institution, and with a standard set of controls.¹ The bigger your dollar spread, the bigger your win. The big winners (surprise?)

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are schools with piles of top SAT scores, and those with high-volume dollar majors (engineering, computer science, pharmacy, business).

Not to be outdone, the American Institutes for Research comes up with another list of dollar-bearing institutions, an “economic success measure” based on earnings and “career progress,” but, defying natural migration, one confined by state borders and with each state writing its own variable boundaries. The Brookings Institution goes a step further to demonstrate how much the future dollars attached to degrees produce not merely federal, state, and local taxes, but, more importantly, different weightings of consumption categories (e.g., housing, food, and entertainment). Around the edges of this noise dance the “big data,” big analytics, and ever-ready-to-sell micro-firms. We know money, they say, and we’ll give you templates for projections of income to sell to your future students. It has become a whirlwind of twenty-dollar bills. Money is the emperor.

The inevitable follows if the institution is the reference point: rankings games, best fit for the sports pages, or what C. Brian Mitchell calls the “college swimsuit edition[s].” I’ll leave them alone, other than to note the extent to which “how much didja make?” now colors their presentations and that, to borrow another phrase from Mitchell, they become “data dumps.” Once money is emperor, everything big data can find gets thrown into the rankings machine, and the yowls of college presidents feed it.

I don’t want to sound too ancient about such things, but the fact is that students enter higher education for different reasons, and they continue through to degrees for grounds that they inevitably discover in growing up have nothing to do with floating twenty-dollar bills. It is a forgotten universe called “life.” A student—whether full time, part time, or mixed enrollment intensity—may enter school X because “my girlfriend is going there, and it’s easy to get in”; “I’d rather commute from home and have my own room, than share a room in another city with a couple of weirdos”; “I liked chemistry, and I’m told they have a great chemical engineering program” (which, of course, the student discovers, is not chemistry); “I visited and loved the history professor’s lecture on New Deal agricultural policy (it was really funny, particularly when she got to soy beans)”; “I visited online, and the student projects and conversations in that class on migration and immigration were really neat”; “they’ve got a rock-climbing wall, free bikes, and a fabulous gym”; “I’m gonna major in biopsych, and they have two Nobel Prize winners on the bio faculty”; “the Afro-Am center was the people-warmest place I’d been in for years, and they were demonstrating really cool African dance routines”—and so on.

As the student moves through the drama of undergraduate education, the girlfriend dumps him and he takes up with someone else in the theater program, discovers he can play Roger in the college production of “Rent,” and is off and running toward that continuous employment market called Broadway. The chemical engineering major becomes a computer science major (loved programming, created all kinds of game apps, and game apps were the end of chemistry). Biopsych was boring, but getting out in the woods and developing templates for recording bird behavior in ethology was really neat (besides, the internship with the state environmental commission showed the student where she could work). The Afro-Am center pushed the student into a study abroad semester in Senegal, and with it, decent fluency in French, and toward work with the World Health Organization.

One hears very little of this in our national conversations. The more the foundations, government agencies, and think tanks promote monetary dominance, the more forgotten will everything else become, and the less these little pieces called “life” and learning will play any role in students’ futures. The powers that be have created the language of public understanding: costs, loans, debt loads, repayments, earnings, multiplier effects, family income (not socioeconomc status), and, of course, payoff, cost/benefit analysis, and its accounting cousin, productivity.

Once money dominates outcomes, employers become higher education’s board of directors

With money comes a combination of job skills and corporate definitions of discrete occupational training competencies; if students learn anything else, it’s serendipitous. The corporate magnet determines a set of reference points toward which institutional pathways and propaganda flow. Student outcomes must be “what
employers want." Student learning must be
driven by “workforce needs.” Curricula must be
changed to fill the gaps that employers identify
in college graduates. The banging of the drums
of the new credential hustlers is incessant:
• “Employers are searching for specific skills to
  fit their business needs.”
• Your capabilities must be described “in ways
  that employers find relevant.”
• Choose programs in light of “employment
demand for related skills.”
• These nanodegrees are “credentials to prove
to potential employers.”
• We’ve got “industry-led, career-oriented,
online certification programs.”
• “They work with industry to deliver people
  the skills to do a job that industry needs.”

Such statements run the semantic gamut from
declarative (this is the way it is), to the subjunctive
(this is the way it should be), to the imperative
(this is what must happen). But regardless of
voice, it’s all referenced to business/industry.

To be sure, not all employers are corporations,
but the proxy will suffice. And there is nothing
wrong with asking the appropriate representa-
tives of major and minor employers what they
look for in hiring, and whether it is produced
by formal education institutions or whether it
is more likely to be produced elsewhere. There
are, however, at least four problems with how
this is done. The first lies in whom we ask. Few
CEOs have any idea beyond clichés, front-line
human resources professionals have radar screens
limited to appearance and mannerism and
recording devices programmed to judge the
grammatical and the articulate, and rarely do
we see a vice president of operations or research
among the respondents.

The second problem is that what those we
ask know of what colleges, community colleges,
and universities do and do not do is rather lim-
ited, even though (or maybe despite the fact
that) they are almost all college graduates. Do
they know what their mantra of “teamwork”
really means (negotiations, feedback, division of tasks, critiques and counter-critiques, rotating roles, consultations, adjustment, modulation) or how some (though hardly all) higher education institutions elicit these behaviors from students? I doubt it. The third problem concerns what they value and don’t value. Think, for example, of punching sign-in cards by 9:00 versus 9:10 or of the multinational that doesn’t care about bilingualism or how it was acquired and used. The fourth problem lies in the extent to which their ideal world holds higher education institutions to be little more than training divisions that save corporate cash.

Again, step back! Listen! Ask what the rhetoric says about who owns higher education. Ask who it implies compose the principal judicial panel ruling on higher education’s purposes, successes, and (more often) failures.

Part of the dissonance here is that today’s “workforce needs,” which corporations/employers want students to match, are not tomorrow’s needs. The case of parallel programming is instructive: the code emerged from hardware (parallel processors) and will be used almost universally by 2020. Who is teaching it—the corporations that will need it? Of course not. Similar observations could be made about carbon fibre applications and large-scale 3-D printing. If we have idea and tech observatories out there—loaded with science journalists, demographers, and folks who can put together political movements, agricultural technologies, and melting glaciers—they will identify trends that lead to trends. The heavyweight employers before whom higher education now bows can’t tell you what an observatory is, let alone imagine the configurations of knowledge and skills of integrating knowledge that future workers really will need—not only as workers, but as citizens. Does it surprise anyone that this type of citizenship—indeed, any type of citizenship—is nowhere to be heard on the “employer” agenda?

Again, there is nothing wrong with corporate–higher education interaction, but the elevation of money as the lingua franca of higher education positions venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, old-fashioned CEOs, and outright hustlers as the de facto board of directors of US higher education. Institutions of higher education have to function as businesses, to be sure, and some of them exhibit downright entrepreneurial behaviors with varying degrees of success. But rhetorical control now lies in other hands, and the rhetoric has consequences.

**Once employers’ needs dominate, so do technology and digital services**

With corporate magnets come tech dominance and the selling of digital services; people fade
into the woodwork. An extreme statement, to be sure, but consider: if we pass over teaching to prepackaged online programs training discrete skills, we have a residual academic workforce composed of

- a few folks who write the programs;
- folks in the entrepreneurial service firms that translate the basic course/module content to interactive digital form;
- a few folks, detached from the course creators, who monitor what students enrolled in those programs do (and who respond to e-mail questions from students);
- folks (more likely tenured than not) who teach upper-division courses that are not easily packaged for digital delivery;
- technicians who fix student computer/server connections;
- managers and facilitators of whatever is left of libraries and library-type services;
- nonteaching research professors and their assistants who deal with nanotechnologies or historical archives or macroeconomic data and analysis;
- a few deans of schools or program chairs who oversee all of this.

The folks in the entrepreneurial service firms are not college employees. Everyone else is, but there are fewer of them, hence improving productivity and reducing costs. (Whether tuition and fees are reduced is another story.) Bravo, right?

In this future scenario, who will be able to respond to a reunion questionnaire item, “My favorite professor was . . . [and why]”? Chances are, the only reunions will be held at elite or public ivy institutions, and the favorite professor anywhere else will be Server IC21. More of life gets washed away, but everyone’s thumbs will become a lot more muscular. In this future, don’t expect any college theater productions or musical groups or (some would say, serendipitously) sports teams with throngs of fans filling stadiums. In other words, don’t expect anything that normally requires person-to-person teamwork, something employer surveys say is high on the list of their desires for future workers and that higher education does not provide. Art exhibits? Not really, if 3-D and texture are included. You don’t get your hands dirty in digital space.

Sure, this is an extreme scenario. Rest easy! It ain’t gonna happen.

### The “disruption” song

Try selling this much-ballyhooed “disruption” to the African American students seeking more personal contact, group space, and minority faculty on our campuses. If disruption has its way, they will be sent home and told to do their work in nano-certificate programs through Server IC21 and to get their badges. That’s not to say that MOOCs (some of which can boast distinguished university sources and providers) or online microprograms in Android design, for example, are dead ends with empty returns. In fact, these putative “disruptors” have shown their worth; they also have simply been added to the delivery portfolios of higher education. The only “disruption,” if you can call it that, is setting up the technical infrastructure, and for that we now have a bevy of “online program management” firms. It is a multibillion-dollar business, and when money rules, it doesn’t sound like disruption to me.

Besides, human beings are too attached and oriented to physical space to expunge it from their lives. I think we learned that from the architectural historians, community planners, and environmental analysts. Or, maybe we didn’t. Ask people who expect there to be an Esplanade, a Golden Gate Bridge, an Empire State building, or a Grant Park, people who expect these physical places and spaces, along with all college quadrangles, to be part of their lives. Likewise, as all learning involves relationships, we are more likely to identify it with reference to breathing human beings, as in “my favorite” or “my least favorite” instructor, or with images of specific students in “my learning work group” (course, seminar, field project, etc.). As the Gallup-Purdue survey of college alumni demonstrates, individual faculty reference points are the strongest fulcrums of learning, and you don’t have to scratch your memory too hard for those images to arise. If Server IC21 and its half-nameless online tutors were at issue, the image wouldn’t register. It’s like your customary tech support person, in online conversation or phone: “Hello! My name is Allison, and I’m here to help you solve your problem!” Allison may be very cheerful and efficient, but she’s not what we expect in organic chemistry or Latin American history or ethology courses.

Further, in the face of its advocates’ arrogant utopias, the disembodied Android world of
MOOCs and online degrees won’t have a chance of disrupting higher education until that point—perhaps three hundred or four hundred years from now—when a generation of human resources officers and other employer personnel recruiters is willing to accept degrees from the likes of Coursera, edX, Udacity, FutureLearn, Miriada X, and StraighterLine in the same breath as those from Cornell and Chapel Hill. Again, it ain’t gonna happen. We do not abandon familiar reference points any more easily than we would abandon orientation to Grant Park.

Where do we go?

It’s time to step back from the symphony of hype that governs discussions of higher education. Write a screed on “how much didja make?” and somebody will make sure it goes viral. Write an op-ed on “disruption,” and somebody will pay you to say something similar to an adoring crowd at a higher education conference. Put a dutifully growling and sad face on your latest crisis paper on workforce gaps, and you will have an instant saleable face. Play the “blended learning” game (even if it’s not really learning, but rather an instructional/delivery-mode genre), and you have a guaranteed full workshop with paying customers. All of this is a byproduct of dollar dominance. Let money rule, and that’s what you will get.

What, at the end of the day, can the leadership of US higher education do to move away from the money game and to extricate itself from the single-purpose vision of employer control?

First, with a unified voice, reject any interpretation of the outcomes of higher education in terms of future earnings. Just say, “It’s so full of holes and is such a distortion of what any educational program seeks to do that we won’t endorse it.” Second, as a corollary to this, with a unified voice, demand that the US Department of Education remove the variable of future mean earnings from its “college scorecard.”

Third, to focus attention on the true outcomes of higher education, every higher education institution should issue a “diploma supplement” to accompany the degree for each qualifying student. Such a US diploma supplement, unlike the European versions, would be about what the individual student did, not about the legal status and organizational memberships of the institution. It would be a maximum of two pages and would consist of

- a half dozen statements of generic student proficiencies, modeled on the Degree Qualifications Profile (i.e., a sample of what the student demonstrated in order to qualify for the degree);
- half a dozen statements of disciplinary-specific student proficiencies in the student’s major or majors (i.e., a sample of what the student demonstrated in his or her major);
- a one-paragraph description of the student’s summative project or summative activity;
- a one-paragraph description of the student’s contributions to the institution, its community, and/or a wider field of national and/or international voluntary activities;
- an optional statement of what the student can do in a language other than English, how well, and where those proficiencies were acquired;
- where applicable, and even if the transcript already marks them, a list of the courses the student completed through either MOOC or other online delivery method, with an indication of the provider for each.

If that isn’t a student-centered outcomes statement, with all its markers tied to the institution (and not something else), I don’t know what is. Any institution of higher education that issues such diploma supplements to all its graduates will simultaneously be setting down a statement of the quality of learning it provides.

Fourth, ironies, ironies, ironies. We love them. We have the best system data in the world on all the issues of employment and earnings we presumably wring our hands about. It’s called “Baccalaureate and Beyond,” a longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). It does not cover community college graduates, but when folks talk about college degrees, the bachelor’s degree is usually what they mean. The study runs for ten years following a given year of bachelor’s award. It’s slow; it’s expensive. But it’s unassailable. So far, one study has been completed (1993–2003). A second, begun in 2008, will conclude in 2018.
The Europeans are planning something similar, and they know just how expensive the undertaking will be, even with sampling, across thirty countries and twenty-five languages. But they also know its value. (In the interest of full disclosure, I have been the only non-European on the “scientific advisory board” of this project). But foundations, higher education associations, higher education administrators, the media commentariat, employers, and legislators alike don’t want to use “Baccalaureate and Beyond.” They don’t want system data unless it suits their proclivities for telling bad stories about the United States. They want individual institutions’ outcomes data. They want “my school,” and you don’t get “my school” from national samples, however scientifically drawn they may be.

So, if higher education wants its own leadership, the commentariat, employers, legislators, prospective students of all ages, and the general public to grasp meaningful long-term outcomes that may be linked to the experience of various forms and combinations of postsecondary education, then it must team up with the National Student Clearinghouse in order to turn the national-sample “Baccalaureate and Beyond” survey run by NCES into a true population survey—that is, to go from twenty-five thousand to six hundred thousand (at a 35 percent response rate). Do a single shot, ten years after 2008 graduation, including both associate and bachelor’s degree populations. That would not be cheap, and it would mean convincing the foundations to fund the effort. But what everyone would get are categories other than “how much didja make?”: civic participation, cultural participation, continuity of employment, contiguity of employment, family formation, further learning (formal and informal), intercultural perspectives, geo-mobility within the United States, life and travel in other nations, second and third language fluencies and expansion, reflective assessment of the relation between higher education and the varied categories of economic and civic life. And we would get them for every institution whose 2008 graduates produce a 35 percent response rate in 2018.

That would be a very rich portrait indeed. But if we want it, there ain’t no free lunch. Ironically, earnings are the free lunch.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.
Regional accreditation remains the most effective lever for bringing about significant change in higher education in terms of assuring quality and protecting students.

For at least two decades, educators, employers and policymakers have confronted an increasingly urgent global hunger for talent—a demand for better-educated workers and more enlightened citizens. Higher education institutions and various oversight entities at the state and federal levels have attempted to respond to this rising demand for education by focusing on policies and practices that support increased graduation rates and improve efficiency.

These considerable efforts notwithstanding, however, current criticism of higher education in general has continued and, most recently, has been directed particularly at the issue of student employability: “whether colleges are graduating students with the skills they need to get jobs and repay their loans.”1 Executive actions announced in November 2015 clarified such expectations explicitly and brought them to bear on the accrediting organizations charged with assuring the quality of higher education institutions eligible to receive federal student aid. Under Secretary of Education Ted Mitchell, quoted in Inside Higher Ed, described the actions as one way of saying to accreditors “we’re paying attention to this with renewed vigor and that it’s going to matter” whether they focus more intently on student outcomes.2

The White House announcement was only the latest in a series of pronouncements about the effectiveness of higher education, particularly with respect to student preparedness for success in the workplace. Unfortunately, it contributes to a disturbing trend that views higher education almost exclusively in terms of preparing students for remunerative entry-level positions in select fields.

By contrast, for more than a decade, employers have been asking tough but appropriately wide-ranging questions not only about how many college graduates the system generates, but also about how well our nation’s colleges and universities are preparing them to succeed in and contribute to a changing global workplace and society. Business leaders have persistently expressed frustration that college graduates are not achieving the broad, cross-cutting learning outcomes they need at high enough levels to fuel a technology-rich, innovation-driven economy.3 They have also complained that transcripts, resumes, and other forms of documented student learning and credentialing do not provide information enabling those outside the academy to understand clearly what students are learning in college. They don’t know what a specific degree or credential signifies in terms of learning.
Given how much more important a highly educated citizenry is becoming to our nation’s economic and democratic vitality, it is not surprising that policymakers at both the state and federal levels have been setting new priorities, enacting new policies, and proposing reforms. But all too often, as business leaders have expressed their concerns about quality and actual learning outcomes, policymakers have been focusing more on access, affordability, completion and attainment rates, and, more recently, average salaries. While these indicators deserve the attention they are receiving, focusing exclusively on them represents a narrow, utilitarian, and ultimately counterproductive view of education in general and of higher education in particular.

Perhaps ironically, the November 2015 executive actions, while reflecting this limited perspective, offer grounds for hope. By directing attention to accreditation, rather than to a circumscribed set of metrics, they invite a response that embodies respect for higher education in all its complexity and that embodies an appreciation for what students need in order to achieve successful careers and satisfying lives as informed and alert citizens. No one can quarrel with the interest in assuring that, as we graduate more students and implement new approaches to workforce training, new forms of online learning and credentialing, and new educational pathways, we serve students more effectively as we assure the public that educational experiences are of high quality. Those are precisely the priorities of accreditation.

If policymakers take this issue seriously, avoiding hackneyed sound bites (“accreditation ignores student learning”; “accreditation inhibits innovation”) in favor of serious analysis, it may be possible to develop a more productive approach to quality assurance and a better system of accrediting institutions of higher education as guarantors of quality and vehicles for student learning and empowerment.

One is the current accreditation system and how it does and does not meet contemporary needs. The second is the movement that has been underway for several decades within higher education to take seriously “learning outcomes”—clarifying what they are, and designing ways to advance and assess them.

A recent blog posting published by The Hill indicates what is at stake and suggests that some policymakers may, indeed, turn their attention to placing meaningful data on learning outcomes at the center of policy reforms. The author notes that, “For all the rhetoric and angst about increasing college prices, the dirty little secret of higher education is that a college degree doesn’t actually represent any particular set of knowledge or skills. We have no idea what our nation is getting—substantively—in exchange for an enormous public investment in higher education and constantly rising private tuition. Do students leave with just a piece of paper or do they leave intellectually with something appreciably greater?”

Accreditation: The pressure to reform—or replace
In an interview published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Judith Eaton, president of the Council on Higher Education Accreditation, describes the current scrutiny of accreditation as “not new, but . . . more intense and more focused.” The principal object of this focus is the system of regional accreditation: six commissions evaluate and “accredit” institutions of higher education in their respective geographical areas. The familiar process of institutional self-study, peer evaluation, and commission action has evolved over more than a century to affirm the public that educational experiences are of high quality. Those are precisely the priorities of accreditation.

In some respects, the system works well. Unlike regulatory processes in most of the rest of the world, US higher education accreditation is independent of governmental influence, it operates economically, it provides numerous platforms for the spread of innovations, and its reliance on peer review—deans and professors evaluating deans and professors, essentially—has helped preserve the diversity of US higher education, from prestigious research institutions to small Bible colleges.

The potential for productive change
In what follows, we examine the potential for productive change and describe both what we see as promising potential reforms and what we believe might be risky policy directions. We approach these issues in light of two realities.
There’s clearly much to admire. Why, then, the “more intense and more focused scrutiny”? The pressure to reform or replace accreditation has been growing for more than a decade. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), and the Center for College Affordability and Productivity have all published demands for radical reform.\(^6\) Accreditation: A Call to Action for College Trustees, a 2013 ACTA pamphlet, advances many of the concerns others have also voiced:

- “Accreditation is very costly.”
- “Accreditors are monopolies.”
- “Accreditation is rife with conflicts of interest.”
- “Accreditors interfere with trustee rights.”
- “Accreditation is no guarantor of quality.”
- “Accreditation impedes transfer.”
- “Accreditation stifles innovation.”

Many of these concerns, and especially the last one, motivated US Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Michael Bennet (D-CO) in fall 2015 to propose legislation that would “create a voluntary, alternative [sic.] system of accreditation.” According to the press release from Senator Bennet’s office, such a system could take the place of a “burdensome input-focused accreditation process.” The release quotes Senator Rubio: “We must end the status quo accreditation cartel that stifles competition, encourages soaring tuition costs and limits opportunities for non-traditional students, such as working parents.”\(^7\)

A few days after the bill was announced, the Wall Street Journal weighed in with an editorial headlined, “Trust Busting Higher Ed.” Commending the Rubio-Bennet bill, the Journal thought it timely that “an obscure network of higher-ed busybodies known as accreditation agencies” would be revealed to the world. “More politicians should study up on how to reform this racket,” said the editorial. Why? According to the Wall Street Journal, the system has become a “cartel” complicit in and perhaps even responsible for tuition increases, grade inflation, the suppression of innovation, and poor student preparation.\(^8\)

**Are radical reforms the answer?**

Some reforms clearly are overdue so far as higher education accountability and quality assurance are concerned. In terms of accreditation, with six different commissions operating within their respective geographical regions, each with its own criteria, procedures, and vocabulary, it should not be surprising that there is little understanding of accreditation among the public or, for that matter, within the academy itself. Greater consistency from one region to another, achieved through the elimination of trivial differences in protocol and procedure, would enable accreditation to explain itself far more effectively to its various stakeholders. Greater gains in efficiency lie within easy reach. Accreditation can become far more agile and welcoming of creativity. Accreditors could build on the progress in the learning outcomes movement. They could publish information that facilitates comparisons among institutions and programs without resorting to crude rankings.
But the reforms that have been proposed, which largely fail to acknowledge the considerable progress accreditation has already made, offer approaches to quality assurance and institutional improvement that could well prove less reliable than the current system. A glance back at earlier experiments with alternatives to regional accreditation, such as the disastrous state-by-state approach to providing initial oversight for the GI Bill, could offer a timely caution. Similarly, the dismal performance of many for-profit institutions in the early 1990s was attributed in part to their “accreditation” by organizations hastily cobbled together for the purpose.

The even greater risk in the Rubio-Bennet proposal and the earlier proposals mentioned above is that they could further what Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), described in a letter to the editor of the New York Times as “a narrowing of the American dialogue about the purposes of higher education over the last two decades.” Her letter expressed concerns with regard to the “College Scorecard” announced in September 2015, but those concerns arise no less from proposals for “accreditation alternatives.”

The Rubio-Bennet bill may or may not survive Congressional scrutiny—few bills do. But it is worth a look if only because it prompts precisely the concerns Schneider expresses. For instance, the bill’s invidious distinction between “new ways people can learn and acquire skills” and “the traditional four year college degree track” reinforces the outdated narrative that “skills,” quickly obtained and promptly exercised in entry-level positions, may be all that many students need to obtain “good paying jobs.” And it can lead to the kind of divisive (and erroneous) challenge that Sen. Rubio offered during the November 10 Republican presidential primary debate and reiterated immediately afterwards on Twitter: “Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less [sic.] philosophers.”

Doubtless, the United States needs competent welders, whether or not they earn more than philosophers. (They don’t.) But at a time when employers are demanding precisely the kinds of high-level problem-solving capabilities that effective undergraduate education should develop—adaptability, an aptitude for continued learning, the ability to create through consultation—the enthusiasm for reducing higher education to a narrow compass of practical skills and for “innovative providers” promising a fast track to entry-level employment deserves careful scrutiny.

The opportunity for genuine reform

Skepticism with regard to the chorus of calls for radical change should not imply an aria in favor of the status quo. Accreditation needs to change—significantly—and its time in the spotlight can be turned to good effect. But for that to happen, educators, students, opinion makers, and political leaders must focus more resolutely on what’s most important to high-quality undergraduate education, namely, student learning. Not “the books in the library.” Not the outdated indictments about the suppression of innovation or the sensationalist rhetoric of “cartel” and “gang.” Not the dubious allure of untested alternate providers. What is needed above all—both for higher education in general and for liberal education in particular—is the expectation, framed by accreditors and embraced by colleges and universities, that every institution, every degree program, and, indeed, every course will define learning objectives that are explicit, understandable, demonstrable, and assessable.

The importance of learning outcomes

Colleges and universities have been publishing broad goals and learning outcomes in one form

Skepticism with regard to the chorus of calls for radical change should not imply an aria in favor of the status quo
or another for many years. But as any quick review of catalogs and websites will suggest, such outcomes are often abstract, aspirational, predictably vague, and signally forgettable. There are some exceptions, to be sure, but they are just that—exceptions. In contrast to the "learning goals" that may express what institutions wish for their students to achieve, what is needed instead are outcomes that students can understand, that faculty members can use in structuring their courses, and that institutions can cite in affirming their graduates’ proficiencies to employers and graduate schools. Such outcomes, to the extent that they are explicit, understandable, demonstrable, and assessable, can provide essential prompts for curricula that are coherent and cumulative, encourage student persistence, and offer a platform for programmatic and institutional accountability. These carefully delineated and assessed outcomes must become the most important priority in any new reforms of policy and any new approaches to quality assurance.

Fortunately, the development of such outcomes, institution by institution in response to differing missions, areas of strength and focus, and student needs, no longer must take place in a vacuum. Important resources such as AAC&U’s LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile have been developed consultatively and refined through wide experience. (Both are described below.) They not only offer convenient points of departure for the task at hand. Their use can ensure that outcomes address assessable student demonstration of attainment; clearly reference the importance of integrative, cross-disciplinary study; and include both applied and “liberal” learning.

Such resources have emerged as part of the broader “learning outcomes” movement. That movement has been fueled not only by external pressures, but also by educators who have been concerned—especially in the face of changing demographics and changing patterns of college attendance—about the intentional-ity of curricular pathways and the actual levels of learning our institutions are providing to students. As early as 2002, a national panel convened by AAC&U noted that, “In their progression toward a degree, large numbers of students enroll at two, three, or more institutions, also taking courses online. For them college can be a revolving door. In the past, students relied on one institution to provide degree programs and, they hoped, to deliver a logically sequenced education. While coherence may have been illusory even then, newer attendance patterns place greater responsibility on students themselves to create meaningful learning from a supermarket of choices.”

More recently, AAC&U published The Quality of a College Degree: Toward New Frameworks, Evidence, and Interventions, which demonstrates
that this trend toward student swirl has only increased. The report calls on institutions and systems of higher education across which students are swirling to collaborate on clarifying expected learning outcomes and demonstrating students’ achievement as they progress: “It is time now to build on the momentum of current efforts to improve curricular design and learning outcomes assessment, time to reclaim and redirect the national dialogue about what matters in college. This must be done in ways that honor the distinctive missions of individual institutions and that ensure all students are well served by higher education.”

These pressures and concerns all have driven a steady increase in attention to how we define and develop learning outcomes and how we measure how well students are actually achieving them in and across all kinds of institutions. Goals for degree completion, such as those of President Obama and of Lumina Foundation, set important objectives for providing many more Americans with high-quality credentials, but such goals are meaningless unless “high quality” is defined. How does that happen? Higher education institutions must understand more clearly the links between setting clear aspirational learning goals, assessing students’ actual learning and achievement, and tracking students’ progress toward completion. The clarity of such goals is key to students’ understanding of their own progress and, thus, to their motivation to stay engaged. A demonstrable connection between quality learning and persistence points to an important but often overlooked principle: students who know what they are expected to learn are likely to work more strategically and efficiently to accomplish their own “big goals.”

Regional accreditation: The problem or the solution? Is regional accreditation less concerned with student learning outcomes and less explicit in its expectations of accredited institutions than it should be? Or does regional accreditation remain our most promising avenue to achieving genuine reform in higher education through a developing consensus on such outcomes? The answer to both questions is, well, yes.

Regional accreditation has in one sense been a leading influence in clarifying expectations for clear statements of learning outcomes. For decades, regional accreditors have insisted that their member institutions identify clear learning outcomes for their students and that they follow a serviceable approach to gathering data and using those data to improve student achievement of such outcomes. In fact, as observed in Higher Education Accreditation: How It’s Changing, Why It Must, “accreditation has provided an important external motivation for what is routinely described as the ‘assessment movement.’”

But there are several caveats. First, because of differences among the regional accrediting commissions, their influence has been inconsistent. Second, “accreditation has [also] been the beneficiary of a movement institutions and higher education organizations have embraced independently,” that emphasizing the importance of clearly defined outcomes. While a positive indicator in one respect, diverse institutional initiatives represent a further complicating factor in the quest for a workable consensus on a shared outcomes framework. Finally, while effective assessment requires evidence that specific learning outcomes are being accomplished, the degree of specificity required varies considerably from one accreditor to another. Regional accreditors may call for outcomes and define processes for assessing them, but they often shy away from mandates about specific knowledge and skill areas required for quality degrees.

A consequence of this complex picture is that, while many institutions of higher education may realize that they need to be more transparent about learning outcomes, they often undertake defining and assessing such outcomes through unique approaches that discourage comparisons. Further, rather than developing a clear statement of institutional outcomes, they may restrict their efforts to certain departments, programs, or schools. Of even more concern is a finding that the results of developing and assessing learning outcomes are rarely used to improve student learning. Regional accreditation clearly has an important role to play in clarifying expectations regarding the development of clear learning outcomes at every level—institutional, programmatic, departmental, course—according
to widely recognized standards. Such expectations naturally include the use of such outcomes to assess and document student performance, to track student persistence, and to improve institutional performance. Further, the influence of the accreditors will become far more persuasive to the extent that they express such expectations according to a developing consensus.

In response to an invitation from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Peter T. Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems has written a white paper titled “Transforming Institutional Accreditation in US Higher Education.” In it, he asserts repeatedly the critical importance of statements of what degree recipients should know and be able to do. The credibility of accreditation is at stake, certainly, but so too is the quality of certificate and degree programs. Ewell calls on accreditors “to map or otherwise justify their own core expectations for institutions with respect to learning outcomes to some kind of external reference point like the Lumina DQP or AAC&U’s LEAP outcomes.”

Ewell also observes at several points that while reforms advanced by particular regional accreditors may be encouraging, real progress will depend on their continuing to find common ground with respect to processes, standards, and vocabulary—especially, we would emphasize, insofar as expectations for and standards governing learning outcomes are concerned. Fortunately, there is an impressive legacy of cooperation on which regional accreditors may draw. But much more remains to be done if the regional accreditors are to speak with one voice on learning outcomes.

**Progress on many fronts**

AAC&U began focusing attention on the clarity of learning goals and on ways to advance those goals as early as 2000, when it launched an initiative called Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to
College. With that initiative—which engaged not only educators, but also civic and business leaders—AAC&U began a long-term effort to work throughout higher education on the issue of learning outcomes. In the signature report issued as part of Greater Expectations in 2002, AAC&U noted that “the central question is simple: what should all students be learning in college? No matter their aspirations or prior preparation, what will all graduates require to lead personally fulfilling and socially responsible lives? What learning should result from an undergraduate education of quality, whether gained from study at a selective liberal arts college, an urban university, an open-enrollment community college for part-time adults, online courses, or a combination of them all?”

AAC&U built on its work in Greater Expectations, which had involved dozens of colleges and universities that were leaders in intentionality about learning outcomes, when it launched the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative in 2005. Through LEAP, AAC&U has continued to test a set of what it came to call “Essential Learning Outcomes,” and has repeatedly documented strong agreement among employers and educators on cross-cutting outcomes such as critical thinking, problem solving with diverse peers, and communication skills. Hundreds of colleges and universities and eleven state systems or statewide consortia now have engaged with the LEAP initiative to clarify their own learning outcomes; to scale the use of evidence-based, high-impact educational practices; to align their curricular pathways with expected outcomes; and to develop effective and meaningful ways to assess students’ achievement of those outcomes.

In 2011, Lumina Foundation released the initial beta draft of the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), adding yet another important element to this national movement to clarify and measure student achievement of learning outcomes. The DQP was crucial because it clearly delineated levels of learning corresponding to specific degrees (AA/AAS, BA, and MA) and “got specific” about how students could and should develop and demonstrate their learning. The DQP applied the concept of learning outcomes to the actual design of educational programs.

Since its launch, LEAP has expanded to a large family of projects, including several designed explicitly around the DQP. And the DQP itself has been revised to reflect the experience gained through such projects. There is, in fact, widespread engagement with this effort to articulate learning outcomes and to demonstrate, clearly and publicly, the degree to which students are achieving them.

The risks—and opportunities ahead
Can the long-deferred debate over the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) provide a platform for reasoned, well-informed discussion of the roles of accreditation and how accreditation might be strengthened? Perhaps. But polarization within Congress suggests that on this issue, as on others, the loudest voices expressing the most obdurate opinions may draw the most attention. If those voices prevail, we may exchange a system of quality assurance that has evolved over time to provide responsible oversight and incentives for improvement for some cobbled-together process managed by a cobbled-together agency.

The result of a clumsy, politically driven reform could be substantive growth in federal influence on higher education, a dramatic increase in the costs of accreditation, far less discriminating processes of review, and, over time, a diversion of scarce public resources to educational entities that add little, if anything, to students’ meaningful learning and long-term development. Instead of propelling improvements in attainment rates and quality learning, we could face a decline in the effectiveness of higher education, access to higher education, and diversity within higher education. In such an atmosphere, the “narrowing” of vision with respect to higher education would in all likelihood accelerate.

But an unprecedented convergence of factors—the presidential primaries, heightened public concern about college affordability, and the necessity for renewal of the HEA—means that higher education accreditation, if it is to survive in its present form, must document the improvements it has made, make clear its intent to make further improvements, and, in sum, manage a convincing response to those who “love to hate” the system. It remains to be seen whether that will happen. But even such advances would not suffice if genuine improvement is the object. The most constructive, influential, and, indeed,
game-changing initiative accreditors could take on is the constructive reform found in the emphasis suggested above, namely, that of clarifying expectations concerning learning outcomes. No undertaking lies closer to the heart of the academic mission. And none has greater potential for informing public understanding and improving student success.

The higher education community as a whole must come together and seize this opportunity. We can take advantage of the remarkable progress made on learning outcomes and on the consensus about what really matters for success in today’s world in terms of learning. As Carol Geary Schneider makes clear in this issue of Liberal Education, the higher education community is poised and ready to provide specificity on quality learning in college. Accreditors, in partnership with their member institutions, must seize the high ground and lead the way.

But the clock is ticking. And the time for action is upon us.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
14. See, for example, Thomas R. Bailey, Shanna Smith Jags, and Davis Jenkins, Redesigning America’s Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
16. Ibid.
20. For more information about the LEAP initiative, see www.aacu.org/leap.
EDITOR’S NOTE: This article is based on a public message issued by AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider on December 2, 2015.

ENSURING THE QUALITY OF college learning is, beyond doubt, the most important responsibility of higher education accreditation. And yet, almost no one currently thinks that accreditation, especially at the institutional level, is what it should be for twenty-first-century students and institutions of higher education.

Last fall, building on President Obama’s 2013 call to action in his State of the Union address, the US Department of Education announced two new initiatives intended, in different ways, to prompt change in higher education’s accreditation practices. It is useful—and potentially alarming—to look closely at the assumptions, problems, and longer-term trends these initiatives highlight. AAC&U member institutions—in tandem with their regional accreditors—should study these proposals and take the lead in repositioning accreditation as a more forceful voice for high-quality college learning while we still can.

The first Department of Education initiative seems to be a kind of national “nudge,” or, as Inside Higher Ed noted in its coverage, an effort to “shame” the accreditors into change.1 The department has organized in one website all the current accreditation standards, setting forth for all to see the chaotic and confusing state of how we “engage” (without actually describing) quality learning and its potential impact on students across many, many different metrics.

What stands out in this chaotic array of accrediting standards is the disconnect between the relative prestige of regional accreditors, widely viewed as superior in their seal of approval to the national accreditors, and their disconcerting collective silence on what they actually mean by quality learning. The department’s website neutrally affirms for each of the regional accreditors, “No specific outcomes.”

Instead, across all the regional accreditors, quality is “assured” via a set of procedural requirements: an institution is expected to define its intended learning outcomes, provide evidence (defined and validated by the institution) that students are achieving at least some of those intended outcomes, and show where it is aiming to improve, both in its programs and in its processes.

The regional accreditors do, in different ways, require attention to broad learning or general education, which is, for those of us committed to the continued importance of liberal education, a positive. But only the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) provides any specificity on expected student capabilities, requiring that its members address “core competencies, including but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking.”2 (This information, it should be noted, comes from WASC’s own standards, and not from the Department of Education’s website.)

But WASC stands alone in holding all its members to specific quality learning expectations. WASC was famously hammered by its most prestigious members for becoming even modestly specific in its expectations for quality learning. The other regional accreditors did not follow suit. Rather, as a group, the regional accreditors continue to defer firmly to institutional mission and autonomy as individual institutions determine—and say very little to the public about—their intended learning outcomes.

To be clear, I know beyond doubt that AAC&U member institutions, for which regional accreditation is a requirement of membership, do care deeply about quality learning. Across all sectors, our 1,350 member institutions model a restless and heartening effort to provide empowering learning to their students. Those imperatives have sustained AAC&U as a community and fill to overflowing our many quality-improvement institutes, meetings, and projects. But equally important—and pertinent to the future of accreditation—the higher education community itself has already reached strong agreement

CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER is president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.
on a set of learning outcomes that nearly all institutions do consider essential.

Thanks to the insistence by accreditors that each institution should define its own intended learning outcomes, most campuses now have institution-wide learning outcomes. Both in 2009 and again this year, research studies commissioned by AAC&U have shown that there is a very high degree of congruence on expected learning across all kinds of institutions—large and small, public and private, two-year and four-year. 1 In other words, we now have a shared framework for defining the hallmark outcomes of a high-quality college education. The existence of this shared framework could allow accreditors to provide—if they would only seize the opportunity that consensus enables—the needed leadership in defining, clarifying, and advancing quality learning.

To be specific: across all sectors of nonprofit higher education, collegiate institutions are collectively committed to broad learning across the sciences, humanities, social sciences, arts, world cultures, and US diversity. Institutions from all sectors expect their students to learn to write well; think critically; develop quantitative, information, and communication fluency; engage diverse perspectives; and develop competence in ethical reasoning. Colleges, universities, and community colleges believe students should prepare for global and US citizenship—with full attention to societal diversity—and they want students to master research skills and learn how to integrate and apply their learning.

All these goals for learning have been captured in AAC&U’s LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and in Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile. Both documents have been widely used and adapted by institutions across higher education.

The good news, in other words, is that US higher education does have—right now—clear expectations for what counts as quality learning. Moreover, as abundant other research makes clear, employers hold largely the same expectations for quality learning, and see these kinds of learning as critical to career navigation and success. 4 To their detriment, however, accreditors’ published quality assurance standards still largely ignore this broad consensus on the learning outcomes college students will need for their lives beyond the academy. Instead, the regional accreditors and their institutional members are keeping their goals for higher learning to themselves, hidden behind an accreditation smokescreen labeled “institutional autonomy.”

The accreditors are far too timid. They are poised—with their members—to offer sorely needed leadership in clarifying what counts as quality learning and in advancing practices that help students achieve these consensus learning outcomes. But instead of leading, they remain stoically silent. This silence is damaging—to the accreditors’ own future and to the future of higher education.

### AAC&U Member Institutions’ Learning Outcomes for All Students

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<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World</th>
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*Note: In 2015, 85 percent of AAC&U member institutions surveyed reported that they had a common set of learning outcomes for all students. This percentage was up from 78 percent who reported this in the earlier 2009 study. Percentages cited at left are the percentage of those with campus-wide goals reporting that this outcome is one of the learning goals they have for all students. The four categories of learning outcomes correspond to a set of “Essential Learning Outcomes” developed as part of AAC&U’s LEAP initiative (see www.aacu.org/leap). For 2009 findings, see Hart Research Associates, Learning and Assessment: Trends in Undergraduate Education; A Survey among Members of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Washington, DC: AAC&U). For 2015 findings, see Hart Research Associates, Recent Trends in General Education Design, Learning Outcomes, and Teaching Approaches (Washington, DC: AAC&U).*

### Intellectual and Practical Skills

| Writing Skills                                              | 99   |
| Critical Thinking                                          | 95   | 98   |
| Quantitative Reasoning                                     | 91   | 94   |
| Oral Communication                                         | 88   | 82   |
| Intercultural Skills                                       | 79*  | 79*  |
| Information Literacy                                       | 76   | 76   |
| Research skills                                            | 65   | 75   |

### Personal and Social Responsibility

| Intercultural Skills                                       | 79*  | 79*  |
| Ethical Reasoning                                          | 75   | 75   |
| Civic Engagement                                           | 68   | 63   |

### Integrative Learning

| Application of Learning                                    | 66   | 65   |
| Integration of Learning                                    | 63   | 68   |

* The starred items are shown in two learning outcome categories because they apply to both.
Specifically, the silence has created a dangerous public vacuum where clear expectations for quality need to be.

The second Department of Education initiative shows how real those dangers are. It involves legislative action to, among other things, give the department the right to review “student outcomes data” in deciding whether to recognize specific accreditors—regional and national—as appropriate decision-makers on which institutions (and students) will have access to federal funds. This request has caused little stir. Given the standoff between President Obama and Congress, no one thinks that legislative action on accreditation recognition is imminent or even likely.

AAC&U member institutions should pay very close attention to this development, however, and here is why. “Student outcomes” is a term the Department of Education and others currently use to cover both learning outcomes (not otherwise defined) and also indicators of economic “return on investment” (ROI). The department is, of course, currently restricted by legislation from giving any attention to evidence of learning. That restraint is not likely to change.

Across both major political parties, however, there is a high degree of very specific interest in ROI—that is, in tracking whether students get jobs, earn good incomes, pay their loans, and so forth. So it is entirely possible to envision a state of affairs in which, thanks to federal policy, ROI data will displace evidence of achievement of learning outcomes entirely.

Economic outcomes data could become the only “student outcomes” data that counts. The department’s current flirtation through the EQUIP initiative with nontraditional “Quality Assurance Entities” (QAEs) could end up leading in exactly this direction. Almost perfectly mirroring the current national confusion on which “student outcomes” really matter, the EQUIP criteria for alternative QAEs are extremely specific on ROI and exceptionally vague on what counts as evidence of quality learning.

Moreover—and this development is already gaining ground in the states—if ROI becomes the default indicator of quality or “value,” we will almost certainly see policy changes that link students’ ROI back to their choice of major, leaving cross-cutting intellectual skills such as critical thinking or ethical reasoning, as well as broad learning across the liberal arts and sciences, entirely out of the quality assurance equation.

In other words, in part because current quality assurance practices now provide no definition of expected learning outcomes whatsoever, we stand in real danger of creating a new regime that assesses quality only in terms of specific majors’ job placement rates, salaries, loan payment status, and other narrowly focused ROI data, including completion rates.

This should be unsettling in itself. But educators also should be mindful that these alternative “quality” metrics will come at the expense of the commitment to broad multidisciplinary learning that has been and remains the signature strength of US higher education.

**Broad learning is at risk**

Across all parts of postsecondary education, general education or broad learning is, by design, the way we prepare graduates for knowledgeable citizenship and for their own lives. A decision—already being enacted in many states—to let
economic ROI from specific majors completely trump any other evidence of quality learning will take direct aim at Americans’ historic view, going back to Jefferson and Franklin, that higher learning ought to help ensure the fiber of our democracy and prepare citizens with the knowledge and reasoned judgment on which self-governance depends.

Choosing ROI metrics as our default standard for “value” will drive further erosion in humanities, social sciences, and creative arts disciplines. This is no fantasy; political leaders already are calling for us to educate fewer people in disciplines such as history, philosophy, and anthropology in favor of a new investment in “practical skills” such as welding and coding. But rhetoric is one thing, and rules another. If the federal government begins to collect and prioritize ROI data by major field, it will create perverse incentives for colleges to prioritize only fields that pay well.

Yet, as AAC&U and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems demonstrated in a recent broad-scale salary analysis, it is the much-maligned humanities and social sciences majors that are sending graduates to this nation’s public service sector—education, social service agencies, law, nonprofit organizations, and government itself. What happens when we create accreditation or other federal incentives to de-emphasize studies that demonstrably build commitment to public service and the greater good?

It is scarcely higher education’s fault that public service employees are paid less than bankers or engineers. But these wage differentials could soon be higher education’s “value conundrum” nonetheless.

Using data on the federal scorecard, the Wall Street Journal has already taken leading liberal arts colleges to task for their failure to secure higher wages for their students. This is not a good development for fine institutions that currently send many of their graduates into education, including doctoral studies across all fields, and into public service.

Will Americans end up shrinking the college curriculum in order to monetize and rate it?

**Bringing our shared framework for quality out of the shadows**

So, where do we go from here? How can we lead at this crossroads moment? To me, this analysis of the current landscape points us in a clear and compelling direction.

We most assuredly do need new ways of making quality learning intentional and visible. And we may indeed need significant changes in quality assurance approaches.

The higher education community itself, however, must mobilize much more forcefully and in concert to make visible the kind of learning students need for twenty-first-century challenges.

And, unless faculty and other campus leaders want to hand accreditation over to ROI calculators, we—the higher education community—must move to persuade our accreditors that we can no longer keep our goals for quality learning hidden from view.

If educators’ vision and judgment are to guide quality assurance practice, the time to articulate and stand behind essential goals for an empowering college education is now.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

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**NOTES**


Hours before he passed away, Sir Donald Wolfit, the British actor and theater manager, was asked what it was like to die. He quipped, “Dying is easy... comedy is hard!”

Developing and validating a teaching innovation may be “easy.” But weaving it into the institutional fabric of teaching and learning? That’s really hard.

At the University System of Maryland (USM), we have taken a close look at a recent series of initiatives piloting course redesign (2006–2014). The courses targeted were multi-section developmental and gateway courses with a history of high DFW rates (i.e., a high rate of students receiving a D, fail, or withdraw). The strategy was to improve learning by applying backward design and making use of active and interactive teaching techniques such as online tutorials and assessments and small group work in class, often supported by undergraduate learning assistants. The hope was that equal or better results could be achieved through the use of such learning-centered practices, even though fewer faculty would be required to teach the courses. It was also hoped that, if these initial redesigns were successful, institutions would continue to redesign courses without further assistance or support from the system office. A matching grant of $20,000 was provided for each course, along with a series of faculty workshops and consulting help.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the USM’s William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation conducted a qualitative study of these initiatives, focusing on three questions:

1. Was the success of the redesigns sufficient to persuade USM institutions to continue and expand this kind of academic transformation once they had to provide all the funds, rather than just half?
2. Did certain cultural and organizational factors make it difficult to sustain and expand course redesign?
3. If that was the case, then how should universities work on those factors in order to foster sustainable, scalable improvements in teaching?

The USM offers an especially good opportunity to explore such questions. The system is made up of eleven degree-granting universities, as well as regional centers and a research institute. It currently serves over 125,000 undergraduates in the United States and abroad, and over 41,000 graduate students. The USM comprises several institutional types that are quite different from one another: research-intensive institutions, three historically black institutions, regional comprehensives, and one of the largest online universities in the United States. The smallest USM institution enrolls about 3,000 students, while the largest serves about 53,000.

To make a long story short, the initiatives met their immediate goals. DFW rates improved by 7 percentage points across the 57 redesigned courses. During the 2013–14 academic year, over 143,000 students received more active and supportive learning experiences, and the equivalent of more than $5 million in faculty time and adjunct expenditure was freed for other purposes, such as teaching upper-division courses.

Beyond these immediate benefits, the initiative’s successes helped the system obtain from the legislature increased funding for academic transformation, including continued work on course redesign at some institutions, the creation of the Kirwan Center to support academic innovation across the USM, and the establishment of new roles in all system institutions to
into the Mainstream
provide leadership for work on academic transformation. The Kirwan Center organized the Academic Transformation Advisory Council (ATAC), which is composed of those institutional leaders. ATAC has led a variety of initiatives since the center’s founding, ranging from the Maryland Open Source Textbook initiative to efforts that resulted in policy changes affecting the use of social media in courses.

This was not an avalanche of change sweeping all before it, however. In the system-supported initiatives, only about 10 percent of the eligible courses were actually proposed for redesign grants; the large majority of faculty held back, even though many of them were interested enough to investigate the option. Even today, the numerous changes sparked by the pilots are vulnerable to the departure of their champions or the next round of budget cuts.

Our interviews with faculty and administrators suggest that seven institutional foundations made a difference for redesign. When a foundation was strong, they often remarked, the work was a bit easier. When a foundation was weak, it was somewhat more difficult to foster redesign. We concluded that it was important to ask seven questions to understand why a successful redesign had, or hadn’t, sparked a sustained, expanding pattern of change at an institution:

1. Were senior administrators and department chairs visibly and continually demonstrating that improving learning outcomes was a priority?
2. Was there an institutional history of pragmatically working across silos in order to solve problems and seize educational opportunities?
3. Did many faculty have beliefs about teaching, learning, and their own instructional roles that were consistent with the activities required for redesign?
4. Did large numbers of faculty already have experience with at least a few of the elements of redesigning a course and then teaching it?
5. Were necessary infrastructure and support systems already available?
6. Did the institution already offer assessment-related services to help faculty use evidence to guide student learning?
7. Were faculty personnel policies and practices encouraging or discouraging faculty to work on innovation?

As we have already described, there was indeed a wave of subsequent changes across the system. Today, the focus in many institutions and systems across the country is on making demonstrable improvements in graduation outcomes. Redesigning a single course here and there is

Far more faculty will need to be engaged in reconsidering not only their own courses, but also how their academic programs can be improved
unlikely to have that effect. To create a pervasive enough pattern of change, far more faculty will need to be engaged in reconsidering how courses and academic programs might improve.

Typically such calls for change have resulted in direct action, such as the USM course redesign initiatives. Our findings suggest that, for such initiatives to spread, institutions also need to strengthen those seven foundations. Following are suggestions for how each foundation might be made stronger.

1. Senior leadership
USM faculty often commented on the benefits of strong leadership from the top—the chancellor of the system, senior administrators at individual institutions, and department chairs. The faculty wanted to see that their leaders were visibly and consistently backing this kind of improvement.

To foster a supportive climate for improving graduation outcomes through academic transformation, senior leaders need to recognize
• that it is essential for the institution to improve graduation outcomes, especially for students from underserved economic and ethnic backgrounds;
• that such improvement can be achieved by changing how students learn (a point some will see as obvious, while others will object that good students will learn and bad students will not, regardless of how they are taught);
• that changes in how students learn will require changes in how students, faculty, and the institution normally use time and money (contrary to the assumption that reform necessarily implies adding something alongside normal practice, with the support of extra money);
• that to accomplish this level of change, the institution needs to take the long view (recognizing that demonstrable improvements in graduation outcomes can easily take a decade of incremental, cumulative steps).

2. Cross-silo relationships
Our interviews revealed that improving even one course requires collaboration among people who might not have met previously and who have no direct authority over one another—for example, faculty, facilities managers, and information technology support staff.

Improving graduation outcomes will require a more extensive set of relationships, some of which will need to have been developed through the normal work of the institution.

If not already happening on a small scale, such collaboration should be encouraged in order to build the working relationships needed for larger-scale and more sustained initiatives. For example, are the teaching center staff, department chairs, online learning office staff, library personnel, and disability support specialists working together yet to help faculty improve their teaching online and on campus?

It takes time to develop the mutual understanding needed for work under pressure. Without such an understanding, people may first overestimate and then, after a disappointment, underestimate the capabilities of their collaborators. The difficulties of collaboration are exacerbated by the fact that everyone in a university feels over-committed and under-resourced, though they may not believe that their colleagues in another silo feel the same. Everyone has priorities that can easily delay or displace the collaborative effort, unless the focus of the effort is of great importance to all. This is why a culture of collaboration can only be produced by persistent effort over many years.

3. Core faculty beliefs about teaching and learning
Interviewees sometimes mentioned that at least a few colleagues objected in principle to the work of redesign. For example, they might object to the proposition that how students are taught in college has a powerful role in determining how well they learn. (Counter-proposition: No, student learning in college is almost entirely determined by the kind of people they are, not by how they are taught.) Or they might object to the proposition that faculty sometimes need to agree on course goals, core content, or assessment techniques in order to promote student success. (Counter-proposition: No, for faculty even to ask one another to agree on course goals, core content, or methods of assessment would be an unacceptable violation of their academic freedom.)

A large-scale reform effort to improve graduation outcomes can quickly derail if even a large minority of faculty refuse to participate because they believe that its goals are foolish or its methods are out of bounds.
and debating such propositions. For example, when discussing appointments, promotion, and tenure, it should be acceptable to explore candidates’ past efforts to improve student learning outcomes.

4. Faculty experience with learning-centered practice

Faculty teaching redesigned courses told us that many of their colleagues were probably reluctant to take the plunge into course redesign because they lacked experience with many of its elements, such as backward design, managing collaborative work in the classroom, using evidence to guide their teaching, or using technology to enable them to teach in a way they’d prefer. Before faculty in a department can take on something as ambitious as improving a degree program, it would help if most of them were, at a minimum, comfortable with at least some such practices. Institutions and grantmakers ought to experiment with new strategies for engaging faculty on a large scale. For example, imagine that one-fourth of the faculty already use a simple collaborative learning activity called “think pair share,” that a quarter of the faculty would be dead set against it, and that the remaining half of the faculty would be willing to try it in the right circumstances. What might those circumstances be? What strategy might a university use to engage that half of its faculty with this comparatively simple, powerful, easy-to-try, low-risk element of learning-centered teaching?

5. Institutional infrastructure and support systems

Interviewees in our study often mentioned elements of infrastructure such as appropriate technology support and appropriate classroom facilities. They mentioned technology support because their redesigned courses often relied on several kinds of digital tools and resources working together smoothly. They mentioned classrooms because their redesigns depended on students’ use of computing and their ability to shift easily from small-group work to full-class work and back again.

For an institution taking on the challenge of improving graduation outcomes, at least two other elements of infrastructure are likely to be quite useful. The first of these concerns the training and rewarding of undergraduate learning assistants (ULAs). Our study discovered that ULAs, depending on whether and how they were employed, had an enormous impact on DFW rates. For example, ULAs enabled faculty to use more active and collaborative learning strategies in their courses. But almost all the faculty leaders had to reinvent the wheel in terms of recruiting ULAs, preparing them, and making sure they were adequately rewarded.

The second useful element concerns faculty members’ need for proactive support in program mapping and design, in improving assessment, and in doing research on what graduates are able to do. A well-staffed teaching center, or the equivalent, needs to provide those supports. In our study, it appeared that some course redesigns could have benefited from more such support.

6. Assessment-related services

This entire essay deals with teaching improvements guided by evidence of learning. For such learning-centered practices to become the norm, institutions need to provide several kinds of assessment support.
Redesign often is intended to develop students’ abilities to work on unscripted problems. Faculty are sometimes reluctant to make such assignments because it can be time-consuming to grade them and provide feedback. Fortunately, there are some time-saving methods for doing that; unfortunately, few faculty are aware of them. The institutional capability to help large numbers of faculty experiment with simple elements of learning-centered practice (foundation 4) ought to be used for this purpose. One example is to adapt and share rubrics in order to describe the goals of an assignment and then to provide grades and feedback.

To improve graduation outcomes, student learning needs to be monitored as students work from course to course. Techniques and services for monitoring student learning range from day-one assessments to uses of learning analytics.

Finally, there is a need for robust student feedback (or evaluation) forms. For example, the institution should offer tools faculty can use to gather anonymous student feedback midway through a course. Such a process empowers both faculty and students, and it lays the groundwork for end-of-course student evaluations.

In discussing the first foundation above, we suggested that senior leaders need to reinforce the idea that rethinking teaching implies rethinking how time, money, space, and other resources are used. But, as our interviews suggested, few faculty begin with much of an understanding of how those resources are currently being used in their courses and departments. How much time and money is needed to provide technology support for a course? How much faculty time is used for grading? Answering questions such as these requires doing some information gathering and spreadsheet-level math. For example, some years ago, faculty at the University of Pennsylvania wanted to make undergraduate engineering laboratories both more effective and more efficient. They asked faculty members and graduate students managing labs to report on how much time they spent on various tasks and, specifically, which of those activities were fulfilling and which were a burden. Their findings led to a successful reconceptualization of lab facilities, staffing, and methods.

For such learning-centered practices to become the norm, institutions need to provide several kinds of assessment support.

7. Faculty personnel policies and practices
As we probed for factors that might discourage faculty participation in course redesign, perhaps
the most frequent remark was “well, there’s the reward system, of course.” The discussions then went on to include other issues related to faculty personnel policies and practices.

Some interviewees mentioned that the use of data from course evaluation forms sometimes discouraged faculty innovation, because no allowance was made for transient drops in student evaluations when work became more challenging. Others pointed out that defining “teaching load” in terms of whole courses subtly discouraged faculty from sharing the work of teaching a course or breaking a course into smaller chunks of instruction. Alternative ways of defining teaching responsibilities are more flexible—for example, through agreements that allocate a certain percentage of each faculty member’s time to teaching-related activities.

Interviewees also pointed to problems caused by the nature of contracts with part-time faculty. The materials and student tools for redesigned courses tended to be updated frequently, requiring section leaders to undergo training—sometimes off campus. Typically, there was no allowance in adjunct contracts for such extra preparation.

**Synergy between direct action and the strengthening of foundations**

The story leading to the course redesign initiatives at the USM began with leadership, when the regents and the chancellor created the Efficiency and Effectiveness initiative in 2004. Two years later, as part of that effort, the first course redesign initiative was funded in order to transform a course in each institution across the system. Early successes and new grants encouraged the regents and the chancellor to set “academic transformation” as one of five major themes of the ten-year strategic plan for the system that was adopted in 2010. From then on, presidents would be assessed annually, in part, on the basis of institutional progress in this area.

System provosts began using “academic transformation” as a regular topic for their monthly meetings. This leadership, along with continuing changes in the larger world, encouraged USM provosts to assign people to coordinate institutional work on academic transformation, strengthening leadership still further. Those same conditions also encouraged the legislature to increase funding for academic transformation. Meanwhile, the system office created a center for academic innovation, which then organized those institutional coordinators into the Academic Transformation Advisory Council. Together, the council and the center provided the additional infrastructure needed to promote student success across the system. They began work on removing policy barriers to innovation and on helping institutions work together to explore new strategies, such as the use of learning analytics (foundation 6), competency-based education, and open-source textbooks.

The synergy between direct action and the strengthening of foundations occurred within
institutions as well as across them. For example, the faculty fellows who helped run the later iterations of the course redesign initiatives also developed the mutual understanding that could be useful in later initiatives. Within institutions, course redesign plans sometimes led to renovating learning spaces (infrastructure), new patterns of collaboration, and fresh experience with learning-centered practices for faculty teaching the many sections of these giant courses. In fact, the USM course redesign initiatives seemed to strengthen all seven foundations, while the seven foundations were helping the initiatives succeed.

Summary
In the past, universities have tried to improve learning outcomes by altering curricula or improving advising. But experience and research in many quarters, including our research on course redesign across the University System of Maryland, suggest that altering courses and programs has a better chance of success if the institution strengthens seven foundations:
1. Seek and retain senior administrators and department chairs who allocate their time and resources to improving learning outcomes.
2. Where needed, work across silos to solve problems and seize opportunities, in the process developing relationships that later can be used for larger-scale, more sustained efforts.
3. Encourage faculty discussion and debate about core beliefs about teaching, learning, and their own instructional roles.
4. Help a large fraction of faculty gain experience with at least a few of the elements of learning-centered teaching.
5. Provide necessary infrastructure and support systems for more learning-centered and more technology-intensive approaches to teaching.
6. Provide the kinds of assessment-related services needed to guide teaching and learning.
7. Examine faculty personnel policies and practices to make sure that they do not subtly discourage faculty, full-time and part-time, from working to improve student learning.

NOTES
1. Earlier work by the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) inspired USM’s course redesign initiatives. In the NCAT definition of “course redesign,” equal priority is given to improving quality and cost saving (by which they mean freeing faculty resources for other purposes). USM institutions eventually used the term only to refer to the rethinking of a course, often supported in part with technology, to improve learning outcomes.
2. For information about backward design, see Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005). In this article, “teaching” includes anything done intentionally to support the learning of others. When faculty members create instructional materials or remain silent to encourage students to talk, they are teaching. When students in a small group assignment help each other get unstuck, they are participating in teaching, too.
3. “Learning-centered teaching practices” are chosen, refined, and judged by actual learning, not just by teaching intentions. The evidence of learning derives from educational research and/or from informal observation and analysis of learning in a particular course or program.
6. For an early anthropological account of this kind of cross-silo overestimation followed by underestimation, see Margaret Luski, Interdisciplinary Team Research: Methods and Problems (New York: New York University Press, 1958).
7. See Ehrmann and Bishop, Pushing the Barriers, 41.
JUDITH A. RAMALEY

Navigating the Rapids
On the Frontiers of the Knowledge Revolution

Over time, the roles and responsibilities of our nation’s colleges and universities, as well as their approaches to educating students, have undergone a number of transitions. The pressure for change has always been shaped by a combination of new generational values and expectations, on the one hand, and broad social, economic, and environmental forces, on the other.

Today’s societal context offers an especially exciting blend of cross-generational change combined with the emergence of complex, multifaceted problems—including, most notably, a host of problems related to poverty, public health, the environment, and other “global” issues.

Many local communities are responding to today’s complex problems through collective-action approaches, social movements, movement networks, and other new forms of collaboration that are focused on creating sustainable communities in which individuals of all backgrounds can thrive in a changing world. The Institute for Sustainable Communities defines a sustainable community as “one that is economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and resilient. It meets challenges through integrated solutions rather than through fragmented approaches that meet one of those goals at the expense of the others. And it takes a long-term perspective—one that’s focused on both the present and future, well beyond the next budget or election cycle.”

Higher education, by contrast, often focuses on individual achievement, as seen through the perspectives of particular courses and disciplines. Although colleges and universities support many forms of scholarship and pedagogical practices that address societal issues within the curriculum, the new collaborative problem-solving approaches developed by communities outside academia are often incompatible with the culture and organization of higher education institutions. It can be challenging to draw upon the resources of an academic community in order to contribute to community-based collaborations.

Yet, more intense interactions between colleges and universities and their surrounding communities are beginning to affect the internal structure and capacity of higher education institutions, while also supporting new forms of collaboration both within the academic community and within the neighborhoods, cities, and regions with which these institutions interact. University-community collaboration depends upon the ability of the participants to think together, to identify problems that are shaping life in the community, and to work together in new ways in order to develop strategies for addressing those problems. The required openness to new voices and new kinds of questions will slowly reshape the academic community itself and foster transdisciplinarity, while still drawing on the traditional disciplines.

What can academics learn from our engagement with society, and what can our community partners learn with us and from us? What happens as we explore new ways to interact with society, and how can that interaction strengthen our own ability to educate and our own scholarship?
Finally, how can campus-community interaction build capacity within the community for collaboration and mutual benefit?

**New approaches to the production and use of knowledge**

Over two decades ago, Michael Gibbons et al. foreshadowed what has become a core component of the collaboration between colleges and universities and their community partners, arguing that a new form of collaborative knowledge production was emerging from within the classic investigator-centered research model. Collaboration has changed how knowledge is being created, where the work is being done, and who is contributing to the effort. This new form has grown into a concurrent and iterative model of knowledge generation and use that is not framed through the lens of a particular discipline, but rather through a new transdisciplinary framework.

Transdisciplinary work differs in some important ways from traditional scholarship in terms of how observations and data are collected, how arguments are made, how the results are evaluated and interpreted, and how knowledge is used.

Transdisciplinarity sets problems in the context of application and insight, and methods of inquiry are drawn from many disciplines as well as from community participants. Those separate disciplinary and professional frameworks are gradually blending to create a different, more integrated approach to the study of complex problems. As colleges and universities move toward more intensive collaboration with government, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and advocacy groups within the communities they serve, and as they redefine their role in community building and embrace the practice of mutuality and reciprocity, new approaches to collaboration will be needed—both within the academic community and within the infrastructure that supports campus-community interactions. Collaborative knowledge is becoming “problem solving capability on the move.”

Knowledge is now beginning to spread more widely through working relationships, rather than primarily through approved scholarly channels.

**Dealing with wicked problems**

A “wicked problem” is one that involves a range of stakeholders who have different values and priorities, has origins in a tangled set of interacting causes, is hard to come to grips with or make sense of, continues to change even as we seek to manage it, and has no clear or familiar solution. As Archon Fung has observed, wicked problems unfold in “a diverse and mutually interacting ecology” of people and organizations and require a great deal of boundary crossing to bring together ideas and resources from multiple sources.

Addressing wicked problems effectively will require new leadership skills; new ways of learning; new ways of working together across organizational, social, and economic lines; and new ways of drawing upon insights from many disciplines and many community perspectives. This will be accompanied by a demand for cross-sector solutions that are shaped by a framework Fung calls “the democracy cube.” The democracy cube raises three key questions: Who participates? How do they communicate and make decisions? What influence do they have over the resulting public decisions and actions? To this trifecta, we might add two additional questions: Who decides what matters most? Who contributes resources, and how will this work be funded?

As Fung explains, wicked problems require “multi-sectoral problem-solving” and ways to remove the barriers to “pooling knowledge and coordinating action” through the formation of networks that connect organizations. These networks are built on two basic premises: (1) finding solutions to many of society’s most pressing problems will require tapping into the expertise and ideas of different parts of the community and different disciplines, and (2) solutions to multi-faceted problems must be designed in an adaptive way, rather than chosen from a repertoire of well-researched and well-tested solutions.

Edward Weber and Ann Khademian have explored the changing role of networks in the repertoire of community responses to wicked problems. They argue that the use of networks is gradually nudging aside more traditional problem-solving approaches based on the marketplace and the choice of a small leadership group or “hierarchies.” These networks are creating new ways to share scarce resources and achieve collective goals in a more flexible, innovative, and efficient way. Networks take many forms and can be hard to define, but they
all involve some form of enduring connection among organizations, individuals, and groups. Many of these networks connect in one way or another with local colleges and universities, which serve either as simple members of the networks or as conveners or “backbones” for them. All networks require a passion for, and a commitment to, the collaborative process; that is, they require a collaborative mindset. Whatever its relationship to a particular network, the campus supports the core resource of any network, namely knowledge transmission and integration. Campuses also serve as a source of participants in the work, including students, faculty and staff members, and alumni whose educational, professional, and personal interests can be well served by contributing to a network that has formed to address a problem they care about.

**New forms of interaction**

To capture the experiences of a diverse community and tap resources that otherwise might be ignored, new forms of interaction among citizens, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the business community are being created to address community problems. These include collective action, social movements, and new public governance.

**Collective action.** John Kania and Mark Kramer launched a new generation of thinking about collective efforts directed at complex problems through their series of articles on “collective impact.” They suggest that five components are needed to create an effective collective-impact model: (1) a common agenda arrived at through a thoughtful process of exploration and interaction; (2) shared measurement systems and a willingness to look honestly at the evidence collected; (3) mutually reinforcing activities that draw on the strengths and interests of each participant; (4) continuous communication among the participants; and (5) a mechanism for backbone support that facilitates the building and maintenance of the relationships needed and the capacity of all participants to act knowledgeably and in cooperation with the others.

**Social movements.** Marshall Ganz describes a social movement as a form of collaboration involving new groups of “purposeful actors,” including individuals and organizations that...
“assert new public values, form new relationships rooted in those values and mobilize political, economic and cultural power to translate these values into action.” Mark Leach and Laurie Mazur call these collective efforts “movement networks.” Networks are often made up of groups and individuals who might not naturally agree on a course of action, but who see value in working together to achieve some elements of a common purpose. Unlike collective-action models, these networks can “deploy a diverse array of assets and strategies, enabling advocates to amass political power [and] scale up impact.”

New public governance. A form of cross-sectoral collaboration that is done in the public interest and draws upon the capacities of partners across public, nonprofit, and private sectors, new public governance draws upon the characteristics of both the classic marketplace model and the relationship model in order to set policy and guide practice. As in other examples of blended models of policymaking and practice, the expectations of “policymakers . . . differ in important and even decisive ways, depending upon whether they regard the policy environment as a marketplace or an interdependent community.” As collaborations and networks of various kinds continue to emerge, providing new ways to act together in order to address the pressing challenges that face our communities and our nation, there will need to be different measures of productivity, different forms of accountability, and different measures of progress toward mutually agreed upon goals.

As Leach and Mazur note, all collaborative models require new kinds of leadership and the ability to manage collaboration across “fluid boundaries of structure and membership.” Indeed, a stable structure can actually be an impediment to success. The capacity to adapt quickly to changing conditions becomes essential in an environment characterized by both uncertainty and constant change. Ganz describes the leadership of social movements as work in a volatile context, requiring “motivational, relational, strategic, and action skills—and the capacity to develop those skills in others.”

In addition, supporting a social movement and generating the capacity for cooperation that lies at its heart will require the creation of a new kind of working space, one that fosters growth, creativity, and an inclination and capacity for action. Such a space emerges from the blending of individuals, networks of people, and cross-sector organizations of various kinds. Perhaps the greatest challenge that people who become active in social networks will face is the need to forge a movement across the lines that often divide us from each other in communities—race,
class, culture, generation, ethnicity. Efforts of this kind place new demands on the anchor institutions and governing structures of a community, including local governments and higher education institutions. Neither of these types of entities is normally organized to be nimble, flexible, and capable of rapid adaptation to change.

**The challenge for our institutions**

To prepare a differently educated citizenry and to play meaningful roles in new forms of community-building, colleges and universities must model informed and collaborative ways of learning and working within their own institutional contexts as well as through their interactions with the broader society of which they are an integral part. The path toward a more interactive and collaborative approach to collective action will have implications for every aspect of campus culture and practice—the nature of the curriculum, the expectations of graduates, the approach to learning and teaching, the nature of scholarly agendas, the ways that faculty and staff careers unfold, and the structure of institutions. The path that lies ahead offers both challenges and opportunities for regaining a core role in society by creating sustainable communities, both on campus and in society at large.

What follows are but a few of the changes and challenges we must address:

- the rapidly changing ways that knowledge is generated, validated, and used
- the increasing fluidity of the disciplines through a convergence and integration not often reflected in curricula
- the emergence of new collaborative models for addressing complex societal challenges
- new technologies that create fresh opportunities to model, simulate, and experiment with aspects of complex and “wicked” problems and to communicate in cyberspace through a growing number of collaboratory environments and social media
- new undergraduate and graduate populations with changing interests, experiences, and goals
- a generational transition in the professoriate as Boomers approach retirement age
- new expectations for college graduates and new demands in the workplace and in the practice of active citizenship
- new working relationships within the communities with which we interact most intensely

that require changes in our academic culture, support structures, and budget models in order to enhance our capacity to recognize and encourage collaboration.

There are no tried and true (technical) solutions to the problem of creating capacity for transdisciplinary collaboration. The process of learning new ways of working together requires adaptive leadership and strategies. In their book *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky focus on how we ought to lead when problems require us to change ourselves, change our ways of thinking, and adopt new forms of interaction with each other in order to create the capacity to work on problems for which we have no tried and true solutions. They describe “a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures.” Adaptive challenges “require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalizes the change itself.” According to Heifetz, Linsky, and their colleague Alexander Grashow, “What is needed from a leadership perspective are new forms of improvisational expertise, a kind of process expertise that knows prudently how to experiment with never-before-tried relationships, means of communication, and ways of interacting that will help people develop solutions that build upon and surpass the wisdom of today’s experts.”

**An education for the twenty-first century**

We can learn a great deal about how to become more adaptive and flexible through our interactions with cross-sector efforts within the communities we serve. What we need to learn, and what our students need to practice, is the ability to read the environment around us clearly, to develop the inclination and skill to work with others to make sense of what we see, to deliberate about what actions might be appropriate, and to act together on the choices we identify. According to Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, the wisdom to act thoughtfully...
and ethically with others is best learned by working alongside mentors and coaches who are practicing those same skills. Practical wisdom “requires nuanced thinking, flexibility, creativity and empathic engagement with others.” These habits can be learned.

Since the publication of the Greater Expectations report in 2002 and the development of the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative a few years later, efforts to rethink the undergraduate curriculum and the experiences that accompany it have led to a shift of emphasis from teaching to learning and from individual courses and requirements to increasing integration of learning over time through the study of increasingly complex problems. Designing and offering this kind of education requires collaborative efforts that bring together faculty, students, and community members to learn and to address “real-world problems.” This approach is more likely to prepare graduates to work in an increasingly collaborative and networked environment.

The overall goal of this shift in the enactment of what it means to be educated is to prepare “intentional learners who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from different sources, and continue learning throughout their lives.” While foreshadowing the realities of today’s world, in which our graduates will use their education in new ways, Greater Expectations focused largely on the adaptations taking place in the colleges and universities that participated in the studies and conversations that led to the report. The societal changes generating the need for new approaches—to the curriculum, to faculty and student work, and to relationships between the campus community and society as a whole—were an important but background element. As communities begin to create new forms of collaboration, we must put those societal changes in the foreground and learn from increasingly networked communities and the colleges and universities that interact with those environments.

In this context, AAC&U’s recently released LEAP Challenge moves in a very promising direction. The key idea here is that all college students should both prepare for and actually work—for a semester or longer—on significant problems or questions during their time in college. Students’ “Signature Work” on these problems will take different forms. Some students will do research on significant questions with mentors on the faculty; others will create e-portfolios that show the range of their work on a significant question or problem; many will do their projects in the community, with community partners. Informed by new developments in the sources and uses of knowledge, the LEAP Challenge seeks to help students and educators think in new ways about what it means to be educated in the twenty-first century. The LEAP Challenge directs our attention to how our graduates will use what they will learn in the future and what they already know in creative and personally meaningful ways to address the kinds of problems that they will face in their lives, in their professions, and in their communities. Each campus that takes the LEAP path will design its own distinctive approach to undergraduate education, using its own set of real-world problems—local or global. The result will be the fostering of new solution-finding capacity in communities throughout our nation and beyond.

Conclusions

Working in a transdisciplinary mode requires deep cultural and structural changes in any organization, including a college or university. Over the past twenty years or so, postsecondary institutions have been slowly embracing a culture of engagement that supports the new kinds of relationships and collaborations that will be needed to address the “big questions” and challenges that shape our era.

The colleges and universities that will thrive in the twenty-first century will be those that embrace deep engagement with broad
societal issues. This will entail rethinking the roles and responsibilities of faculty and staff, the allocation of resources, and the opportunities provided for students to contribute to collaborative problem solving. It will also entail finding ways for all members of a campus community to work across disciplinary and organizational boundaries in order to foster adaptive leadership and shared responsibility. The patterns now emerging suggest what these more interactive and cross-disciplinary institutions may look like: they will be connected to a rapidly growing network of cross-sector collaborations within society at large. The components of a reconfigured internal community will increasingly create greater capacity to connect to the elements of more collaborative external environment. These growing connections between higher education and other community-based organizations and groups will begin to reflect and support a true culture of engagement, both on campus and beyond.

On campus, the culture of engagement will expand access to innovative and relevant educational programs, new research interests, and sources of information gathered both from the work of the academic community and from the knowledge and experience of external community members. This expansion will be supported by a broad array of partnerships that address social, economic, and environmental issues; a growing capacity to integrate efforts across the campus; and new forms of engagement within the university, along with new policy choices that will support and invest in engaged scholarship and collaboration. The result will be a more collaborative approach to both learning and scholarship. The shifts in culture, working relationships, and expectations will create new capacity to work on “big questions” and, thus, will have a measurable impact on the quality of life locally and globally through a focus on building sustainable communities.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES


3. Ibid., 5.


6. Ibid., 515.

7. Ibid., 517.


19. Association of American Colleges and Universities, Greater Expectations, xi.

20. For information about the LEAP Challenge, see http://www.aacu.org/leap-challenge.
The Continuous Death and Resurrection of the Liberal Arts

NORMAN JONES

ABOUT THIS SERIES
Marking the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the association, this four-part series of commissioned articles explores various aspects of AAC&U’s work over the past century in relation to contemporaneous developments within American higher education more broadly. This article is the third in the series.

No matter how dark things may seem, no matter how presentist the pundits, liberal education seems set to continue—as will AAC&U, without whose leadership the past hundred years in American higher education might have looked very different.

The death of the “liberal arts,” however defined, is a motif of lament in American higher education. It became a popular leitmotif in the late nineteenth century. But like a Monty Python character, it keeps lifting its head and proclaiming, “I’m not dead yet.” Over the past century, there have been heated debates about the future of the liberal arts curriculum, mostly based in a narrative of decline from a golden age just beyond the time horizon. But the ideal of a broad general education in the liberal arts has been resilient. One cause of that resilience is the organized defense of the liberal arts conducted by the Association of American Colleges (AAC), later the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The founders of the AAC in 1915 were worried about the future of the liberal arts college. The invention of the major and the proliferation of institutions, such as land-grant universities, that had “careerist” agendas threatened the validity of the old liberal arts curricula, with their foci on the humanities and languages. The debate within liberal arts colleges in the years before World War I was about how to, and whether to, unite the curricula of the liberal arts and the new career majors.

Essentially, there were two conflicting visions of education warring for control of the American academy. The older tradition, sometimes called the “generalist” position, saw higher education as a time of broadening and deepening the character of the men (mostly) who went through it. The other saw higher education as a way to deliver valuable career skills, a position referred to as “careerist.” Under pressure from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to accept its pension plans by adopting its model of curricular organization, most colleges had begun to package the curriculum in the same way, and most were seeking to resolve the tension between the generalists and the careerists. In some, of course, the careerists were winning. This was true especially in the land grants, with their explicitly secular applied curricula (even though the law charged them to ensure an education in the liberal arts, too). Most institutions had multiple masters, and their curricula were pulled and pushed by them. Some institutions almost belonged to their benefactors, many of whom wished to create German-style research universities. The interventions of wealthy founders like Jane Stanford had great influence, and so did the religious denominations that owned many American colleges.

Many college presidents—and these predominated among the founders of the AAC, whose inception came from the Council of Church Boards of Education—represented the tradition of Christian liberal arts education. Education was for the good of the soul. In what they saw as a fight for the soul of America and the survival of their colleges, they sided with the generalists and were suspicious of the careerists.

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1944

Enactment of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, popularly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, provides returning veterans of the Second World War with a range of benefits, including funds for college education.
The first issue of the AAC Bulletin was devoted to the Christian education of young men. Of course, it was a small, mostly elite, group of young men, whether black or white, taught in very small institutions. But even there, the pressures to provide career tracks were forcing change, because of the competition from huge state institutions.\(^1\)

The crisis that threatened their higher education industry was forcing alterations in the curriculum. For instance, by 1910, Wake Forest University had abandoned a traditional liberal arts curriculum and replaced it with the sort of general education/major program that is familiar today. This new model was intended to provide a broad liberal education, while reducing dropout rates and smoothing entry into the professional curriculum in the junior year.\(^2\)

But this sort of 2+2 curriculum prompted another question. If the liberal arts occurred in the first two years of the curriculum, how were they to be judged? If they were to do what they promised, how could they do it within that constricted space of sixty Carnegie units? And should all faculty teach the general subjects? Should faculty members be allowed to do research when they were hired to teach? Was learning more effective if undergraduate research was required? The subjects within the liberal arts curriculum began to swell, becoming plumper and plumper as “nouveau” disciplines like communications crowded in with claims to teach the things the liberal arts taught. And something had to be sacrificed to make room. Some of the core of the old curriculum was pushed out. Colleges began dropping the requirement of classical languages for admission, and high schools followed suit. In their place came modern languages (sometimes) and social sciences, on the German model, almost always.

**World War I changed the apologia for the liberal arts, as their defenders claimed them as preparation for leadership in war and peace**

**The First World War**

World War I changed the apologia for the liberal arts, as their defenders claimed them as preparation for leadership in war and peace. They asserted that a liberal arts education was necessary for the defense of Euro-American values. The year 1917 saw the beginnings of the “western civilization” curriculum at Chicago as a “why we fight” class for men about to be sent into World War I. The presidents who attended AAC meetings made it clear that their colleges would do what it took to support the war effort, but the tension between the careerists and the generalists remained, even if they agreed civilization had to be saved. One type of institution made civilization and civilizing the primary business of higher education. Other types argued that salvation lay in an education that escaped the musty restraints of ancient learning and taught scientific management and “useful” sciences. Some of the generalists rejected the utility argument in favor of
great books and ideas; others tried to compromise between them.

The “Civilization” curriculum at the University of Chicago developed into the Common Core movement associated with Maynard Hutchins and Norman Adler. Hutchins, seeing an education in the great ideas as essential to civil society and world peace, attempted to redesign higher education. While he was president of the University of Chicago, he presided over a new curriculum exposing students to four years of the “Great Books.” Hutchins later influenced the establishment of the St. John’s Annapolis curriculum, with its “perennialist” four-year core of classical texts. Anti-historical, this sort of general education core assumes that great ideas speak clearly across the historical gulf. Hutchins and his colleagues had rejected specialization in favor of the eternal truths, but in most American colleges there was a more pragmatic approach, seeking to unite the personal formation of the individual with good citizenship, ethics, and responsibility.

That civic improvement argument intensified as the social and political crises of the 1930s became more frightening. By 1939 a new rhetoric of liberal arts had emerged, less interested in the great ideas and more focused on bettering society. Lotus Delta Coffman, president of the University of Minnesota, put it this way in an issue of the AAC Bulletin:

A liberal education is not a matter of studying certain subjects; it may flow from any subject. It implies something more than knowledge of the social sciences, of art, of literature, and of mathematics. Indeed, one may graduate from a liberal arts college without having been liberalized at all. The most important by-product of every subject of study should be a liberal mind. And what do we mean by a liberal mind? We mean a mind that has broad interests, wide knowledge, cultivated tastes, appreciation and sound perspective. We mean a mind that includes a standard of ethics and a keen sense of responsibility.

That liberally educated mind was inoculated against the nasty dogmas loose in the world. William F. Russell explained, in “How To Tell a Communist and How to Beat Him,” that “the only way to fight an idea is by meeting it with another idea; and the only way you can meet it with another idea is by proper education.” He called for teaching students about the ideas of fascism and communism “right down to the bottom.” This would protect America from the evils stalking Europe. “Our institutions of learning,” wrote Louis C. Wright, president of Baldwin-Wallace College, “are to train men and women not for war, but for the world beyond and after war . . . helping build minds that can see and persons who can lead . . . in the world day after tomorrow!”

The Second World War

This argument for the broader curriculum became prominent in World War II when some politicians and educational leaders favored shortened degrees that contained no liberal education, restricting the curriculum to utilitarian STEM subjects needed for war work. Winning the war required chemists, not humanists.

The generalists pushed back hard against this narrowing conception of higher education. At Harvard, President Conant launched a review of American education in 1943 that produced the 1945 report, General Education in a Free Society. In its preface, Conant recognized that the shape of American education was changing:

The war has precipitated a veritable downpour of books and articles dealing with education. In particular the future of the liberal arts colleges has been a subject of widespread discussion both within and without the academic walls. There is hardly a university or college in the country which has not had a committee at work in these war years considering basic educational questions and making plans for drastic revamping of one or more curricula. . . . The Association of American Colleges has not only sponsored the publication of a book on the liberal arts but it has also arranged important conferences dealing with various phases of college education.

The report of the Harvard committee went beyond Harvard, and beyond the narrow remit of the liberal arts taught in elite institutions. It sought to define an adequate education for “all American youth.”

Conant’s committee deliberately chose to talk about “general education” rather than “liberal education” because they wanted it to be clear that the report was responding to the tremendous problems caused by the democratization of American high schools and the need
for generally educated citizens. Besides causing the "elephantine" growth of athletics and the "strange flourishing" of fraternities, the influx of new students brought with them a "Babel of gifts and backgrounds."8 Analyzing the issues in what we would now call a "K–16" perspective, they suggested ways to provide the general education everyone needed. Musing on the change they were seeing around them, they wrote, "We are at a turning point indeed in human affairs though we can do no more than guess what vectors may be needed to describe our spin. General education is the sole means by which communities can protect themselves from the ill effects of overrapid [sic.] change."9

The Truman Commission report of 1947 confirmed Harvard’s argument for a general education component in all degrees—though that component was broadening to include more and more subjects. As it says, "Education is by far the biggest and the most hopeful of the Nation’s enterprises. Long ago our people recognized that education for all is not only democracy’s obligation but its necessity. Education is the foundation of democratic liberties. Without an educated citizenry alert to preserve and extend freedom, it would not long endure."10 The report therefore concerned itself with national unity, liberty, and equality, preparing Americans for international leadership in the age of the atomic bomb. Education was for a "better nation and a better world."11

The Cold War

The demobilization of America’s armies combined with the GI Bill to direct a torrent of people into higher education who would never have been there otherwise, while the continued militarization of the Cold War directed a torrent of research money toward campuses. The enrollment of returning service men and the explosion of funded research challenged the liberal arts tradition in new ways. The veterans were less interested in the "impractical" side of the curriculum and were more anxious to have employable degrees, beginning a change in emphasis on campuses that often pushed the general education offerings into a corner and made them ever more general in order to allow students to find "relevant" courses. Even liberal arts colleges succumbed and got into the business of business schools.

By the end of the baby-boom expansion in the mid-1960s, the debate between the generalists and the careerists had bowdlerized the curriculum. General education, though nearly

The Truman Commission report of 1947 confirmed Harvard’s argument for a general education component in all degrees.
ubiquitous, had lost its meaning and focus in the rush for expansion. By the early 1970s the demand for “relevance” in the curriculum broadened a river that was already a mile wide and an inch deep. Moreover, popular support for liberal education was declining. By the mid-1980s, the Carnegie Foundation, revising its classifications of higher education institutions in America, discovered that the number of liberal arts colleges had been cut in half since the classification’s beginning in 1970.12

At the same time, expanding government funding and changing student bodies put pressure on the AAC. It had been an inclusive tent, but it became harder to be all-inclusive when government money was involved. The AAC was lobbying for independent colleges and universities with federal funding agencies, to the annoyance of its members that were public institutions competing for the same dollars. The split between liberal arts schools and the large public institutions became increasingly apparent, and the AAC found itself caught in the middle of a difficult battle over institutional roles and responsibilities. Ironically, the problem was compounded by federal student aid. Students had more choice, even as the demand for college grew. But how those dollars were directed caused trouble within the AAC. As the AAC’s leaders feared, federal money was influencing the way higher education understood its roles.

The new paymasters were asking for more and more information about their investments: data on admissions, data on completions, data on “value added.” At the same time, the glut of faculty in the 1970s permitted institutions to drastically reduce their unit cost of credit hour production by turning to contingent faculty, who, although perhaps exceptional, were not responsible for the formation of students, just the delivery of credit hours. The expansion had neglected general education, and by 1977 there were voices of concern from all sides. That year, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching declared general education to be a disaster area, the US Department of Education’s report Educating for Survival called for a new core curriculum to strengthen social bonds, and Harvard issued a call for the reform of general education. Just the year before, the AAC, taking note of internal strife, split off the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and changed its own focus to address the urgent need for curricular reform.13

That change opened the AAC to a broader audience and, as it became seen as a national voice in the debates about liberal education, it attracted as members institutions that had once shunned it as an elite organization. The shift of its interests was embodied in Integrity in the College Curriculum, a 1985 report that would guide the association’s responses to curricular issues and transform it into the leading forum for discussions of undergraduate curricula.14 Eventually, the association recognized the expanding nature of its role by changing its name to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in 1995.

Meanwhile, leaders of American higher education were seeking solutions to the decay of general education. As educators agonized about what was to be done, proposals for reform began to emerge. On the one hand, there were seminal calls for reinvigoration, like those coming from Ernest Boyer. On the other hand, there were growing calls for higher education to be more accountable to its stakeholders, along with a growing public repudiation of the taxpayers’ responsibility to make higher education affordable. The latter movement was embodied by Ronald Reagan, who, as governor of California and later president, defined liberal education as an intellectual luxury the nation could do without. He dismantled the lavish public support for higher education in California. As president, he wanted to remove federal support for “intellectual curiosity,” proposing to abolish the
National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities.15 He failed to kill the endowments, learning that it is dangerous to stir up America’s most articulate groups, but in defense, and offense, higher education redoubled its struggle for accountability in the curriculum.16

In this atmosphere of distrust and concern, Ernest Boyer’s ideas about how to repair the undergraduate curriculum were seminal. His *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* was published in 1987, capturing the frustration over the decaying undergraduate curriculum. Leading a team of seventy-five researchers, Boyer made recommendations on how to improve teaching and learning on campuses. Among other things, he called for integration of general education with the major, undergraduate research, better faculty rewards for teaching, and smaller classes. What he did not do, however, was explain how to implement these changes.

It was at this time that AAC/AAC&U began to think about the practicalities involved with improving undergraduate education. The change in the association reflected changes in practice and perception going on in the member institutions. The very growth of the association points to how institutional attention to undergraduate education and the values of the liberal arts had brought schools to the table that were notably absent in earlier years. The association became the “big tent” in which over 1,300 colleges and universities wrestle with their common concerns.

**The new century**

But all the learning innovation sponsored by AAC&U in the late twentieth century was not changing the narrative of decline about the liberal arts that had begun in the late nineteenth century. The claims of their demise mixed, ironically, with attacks on liberal education as too elitist, too expensive, and too impractical—claims heard in 1915 and still being parroted in 2015. But when Carol Geary Schneider became president of AAC&U, the association went on the offensive against this folkloric dismissal of the liberal arts. Trained as a historian of the seventeenth century British civil wars, she understood the need to actively change the narrative in the heads of faculty, policymakers, and the public. As she wrote in 2001, “Liberal education at the dawn of the twenty-first century rates an A for creativity and D- (or worse) for communication.”17

Consulting with educators, looking for good examples, and engaging with the press and policymakers, AAC&U publicized the importance of liberal education and helped change the curricula, engaging in the debates about assessment, value added, faculty status, diversity, civic engagement, and other matters about which faculty, institutions, and the public care. Importantly, it began commissioning surveys of employers, demonstrating with data that a liberal arts education was valued in the marketplace.

All of this came together in the 2002 report *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. The report articulated the purpose of a liberal arts education and provided models for innovation in curriculum and structure. Liberal Education and America’s Promise, a public advocacy and campus action initiative aimed at creating common aspirations and understanding around undergraduate education, followed in 2005. Taking the next step, AAC&U partnered with Lumina Foundation on the first version of the *Degree Qualifications Profile* which was released in 2011,18 providing a way for institutions to display, assess, and explain the relationship between the liberal arts and the majors.

In the process, listening to its members, AAC&U voiced a new understanding of what the liberal arts are. Bringing together the warring perspectives of the careerist and the generalists, it articulated the liberal arts as being about the student, rather than the institution.19 Remarkably, this new way of defining the liberal arts/general education managed to put the round
peg of traditional liberal arts, with their focus on individual formation, into the square hole of careerism. By centering on the student, rather than the institutional type, the delivery method, or the content area, it reaffirms what has been obvious to most thoughtful observers: a broad liberal education is possible and necessary for all and should prepare graduates simultaneously for work, civic participation, and life. Moreover, we know what kinds of teaching make it possible, and there many places where good practices are available for copying.

These developments were timely. As America entered the Great Recession of 2008, higher education, like the rest of the country, felt the pain. Using these new tools to chart a course, the AAC&U membership was armed against some of the austerity forced on higher education. If anything, the recession made the need for an understanding of outcomes that matter more important than ever, just like during the Great Depression. As the president of the AAC said in 1932, “There may be revolutions and panics—social, political, military, and financial. The colleges refuse to be moved thereby from their steady purpose to achieve.”

Have the careerists or the generalists won? Neither—and it is unlikely that either ever will. American higher education holds the values of both in creative tension. The liberal arts college has not died, and neither has the research university. In 1915, it seemed the liberal arts curriculum was going the way of the buggy whip, but it did not. It changed as social needs changed, but it has always been recognized as an important part of students’ preparation. No matter how dark things may seem, no matter how presentist the pundits, liberal education seems set to continue—as will AAC&U, without whose leadership the past hundred years in American higher education might have looked very different.

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NOTES
8. Ibid., 33–34.
9. Ibid., 266.
11. Ibid., 5.
16. I testified at the Senate hearings on the NEH and the NEA, along with Leontyne Price and Buckminster Fuller. Price sang her testimony, and drew huge press coverage.
“Now he would prowl the stacks of the library at night, pulling books out of a thousand shelves and reading in them like a madman. The thought of these vast stacks of books would drive him mad: the more he read, the less he seemed to know—the greater the number of the books he read, the greater the immense uncountable number of those which he could never read would seem to be.” So goes the experience of Eugene Gant, a fictional character based on the author, Thomas Wolfe, himself deep in the stacks of the library at Harvard University. With nary a computer, smart phone, tablet, or pair of those Google cyborg glasses, just seemingly endless stacks of print books, this young man is experiencing some form of information overload, information overstimulation, or infogluttony. He is obviously curious and eager to learn, but completely swirling around in an eddy of information and recorded human knowledge—again, print only. Fast forward to 2015. Today, this sort of information-induced “madness” would look very different. It could be achieved anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection or access to mobile data, and its cause would be quantified in exabytes, not volumes.

**Googling vs. researching**

While libraries and their vast unique collections, both print and online, still hold a critical place in the modern information landscape, certainly within academia and higher education, students today, and most everyone, really, find what they need—usually a satisfactory “answer” to something—somewhere else. Ah yes, even I am “Googling” stuff all day long. It is not my intention to deliver a message of doom and gloom, or to say that the Internet is turning us all into simpletons (although many have told us it is), because again, for most of my own day-to-day information needs you can be sure, I’m Googling it. It is important, however, not to conflate “Googling it” and finding a bunch of stuff—often some pretty good (or good enough) stuff—with using the Internet to really do research.

When you “Google it,” you are engaged in an information snatch and grab—get in, get out, move on. Folks who work in web design and Internet marketing are well versed in search engine optimization and the critical importance of having a link appear on the first page of someone’s search results. A study done by Chitika, a major online advertising network, found that over 70 percent of Google search “clicks” go to the top three results. Over 90 percent click only on the first page (results 1–10), and the likelihood of someone clicking on the first result on the second page drops 140 percent from that of the last result on the first page. One might argue that our tendency to look only so deep is like a natural defense mechanism against information overload in the online environment. And what’s wrong with this? This approach to search usually is plenty sufficient and, well, extremely efficient. It becomes a problem, however, when students rely on this

**Information Literacy is a liberal art**

TODD J. WIEBE

The Information Literacy Imperative in Higher Education

TODD J. WIEBE is librarian with rank of associate professor and head of research and instruction at the Van Wylen Library at Hope College.
Information literacy is more than just a contrived educational buzzword librarians like to use for “how to search the library” or “beware of Wikipedia”

tried and true tactic in pursuit of answers to more complex and nuanced questions—non-trivia-type questions, if you will. And I’m not talking about Google versus the library; I’m talking about “Googling it” (now speaking metaphorically for “convenience searching,” wherever it is you are looking) as opposed to really searching—digging, locating, uncovering, reading, evaluating, synthesizing, perhaps spinning off into an unexpected tangent, and then recalibrating, asking for help, searching again in a different place (a novel idea, right?).

In other words, I’m talking about “Googling” versus researching and, all the while, knowing what, in fact, each piece of information is that you are looking at and whether or when and why and how you would want or need to use it—on the open web or in a library, or both! To do this well, “information literacy,” or, as it is now sometimes called, “information fluency,” is of the essence. More on that later.

Our students are born into and only know this age of ubiquitous and seemingly infinite information (in terms of both sheer quantity and accessibility). They are no doubt slick and fluid users and avid contributors—or, often in the case of social media, “sharers”—of information via their personal devices and within their carefully curated or customized microcosms. This customization is done, in part, by them, but largely by a “big data” algorithm deciding—calculating—what it is they want to see. In fact, so much information comes to us today not as the result of a search we initiate, but through a feed that just keeps coming, showing us the things we might be interested in—our own personalized echo chamber or periscope for the information that fits our online profiles, and I’m not just talking about ads. As former Google CEO Eric Schmidt predicted, soon “it will be very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them.”

All of this creates an illusory comfort within vast pools of information and a sense that “finding stuff is easy.” But this fluidity within the “familiar” simply does not carry over into situations requiring serious inquiry and deep investigation using a variety of source types and mediums (i.e., the “unfamiliar”). Several illuminating studies, not to mention years and years of anecdotal evidence that any librarian would be more than happy to tell you about, confirm that this gap, and students’ inflated sense of their own information literacy acumen, exists.

When students either discover for themselves or are straight out told that a particular assignment is going to require a very specific type or types of information (not just something that sounds good and seems to be from a “credible” source), their old system crashes. The very linear and dualistic “search-find” process just doesn’t cut it. And when they begin to look beyond their circumscribed safe zone, whether or not they are as insatiably hungry to find and devour everything in sight like Eugene Gant in the Harvard Library stacks, they find themselves in a similarly dizzying deluge of strange new information options, a phenomenon that predates the Internet and online libraries.

There is so much great information hiding behind that first page of search results. But why go there? What is there? What to do with it?

This is where information literacy comes into play.

Information literacy as a liberal art
The most recent definition provided by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a major torchbearer for information literacy in higher education, reads as follows: “Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.” This really is just a start, and still rather nebulous, but you can begin to see from it that information literacy is more than just a contrived educational buzzword librarians like to use for “how to search the library” or “beware of Wikipedia.”

Information literacy draws on a repertoire of critical inquiry skills. It involves knowing that there are different types of information, each with its own origin, purpose, and place along the information spectrum; knowing how to navigate through a variety of information environments, and why you’d want to do so; and habitually evaluating, questioning, and verifying what you find. Information literacy also involves understanding that there is no one perfect source to be coupled with each new
question; being mindful about appropriately and ethically incorporating someone else's information or intellectual property into the new information that you create; knowing that a book isn’t inherently a good source just because it’s “a book” and that the content of a website is not, by definition, subpar because it is freely available online; and understanding that the format or medium in which information is presented does not define its quality or appropriateness. Most important, it is about acknowledging that efficiency is not always the primary goal in gathering information, and that the act of “searching” is not the subordinate, lower-order operation or activity it is often reduced to. Indeed, an interactive and vigorous information-seeking process may be described as one that is “nonlinear, dynamic, holistic, and flowing.”6

In their seminal article, “Information Literacy as a Liberal Art” (think about that for a minute), Jeremy Shapiro and Shelley Hughes assert that, as information becomes more accessible and omnipresent, “information literacy should in fact be conceived more broadly as a new liberal art... as essential to the mental framework of the educated information-age citizen as the trivium of basic liberal arts (grammar, logic and rhetoric) was to the educated person in medieval society.”7 Coincidentally, this was proposed in 1996, the same year that Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin began work on what was then a groundbreaking doctoral project at Stanford.

Indeed, well before the immensely consequential Google revolution, claims like this were being made about the need for information literacy education. Forty years earlier, Patricia Knapp of Wayne State University wrote that “competence in the use of the library is one of the liberal arts. It deserves recognition and acceptance as such in the college curriculum. It is, furthermore, a complex of knowledge, skills, and attitudes not to be acquired in any one course but functionally related to the content of many. It should, therefore, be integrated into the total curriculum.”8 Replace “the use of the library” with “information literacy” and there you have encapsulated a good part of what contemporary academic librarians tirelessly advocate for.

Information literacy is a liberal art. Naturally, I embrace such a notion, and do not see it as being too high flown. At the philosophical level, librarians believe that information literacy is a fundamental part of students’ broader skill set that will help them be effective and responsible users and creators of information, both in college and beyond. An education in information literacy aims to empower students to use critical inquiry skills wherever they are. Most of them, in four years, will not be on a college or university campus. When taught as it should be, information literacy, like other “meta” skills, becomes portable—a habit of the mind that goes places.

Hope College
The University of Washington’s Project Information Literacy is an ongoing national study of college students, from their first year to post-graduation. During a recent phase of the study that focused on graduates, the investigators also interviewed twenty-three leading employers, asking questions about their expectations of recent college graduates upon being hired. Nearly all of the employers said they expected job candidates, whatever their fields, to be able to search online—a given for a generation born into the Internet world. But they also expected prospective hires to be patient and persistent researchers and to be able to retrieve information in a variety of formats, identify patterns within an array of sources, and dive deeply into source material.

Unfortunately, however, employers reported that new hires typically “default to quick answers plucked from the Internet,” a strategy that may work for “looking up a definition or updating a fact, but for many tasks, it proved superficial and incomplete.” In 2013, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published a report on its own survey of employers, which found that 72 percent of them believe that colleges and universities should place greater emphasis on the “location, organization, and evaluation of information from multiple sources.” In both of these cases, although they did not specifically name it as such, employers were talking about information literacy.

Information literacy across the curriculum

Several years ago, as part of its Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project, AAC&U released the Information Literacy VALUE Rubric, which is specifically intended to gauge students’ work in this area. The rubric’s scale covers five broad constructs of information literacy, ranging from “Benchmark” to “Capstone.” As a tool, the rubric was designed to work best with a collection of student work, emphasizing information literacy as a holistic, as opposed to task-specific, practice and disposition. Indeed, just as information literacy cannot be demonstrated by a student in a single piece of work, the spectrum of skills that comprise it cannot be taught in a library session or two interspersed throughout the undergraduate experience. These “single serving” lessons are often assignment driven and time sensitive. Moreover, this model of library or “bibliographic” instruction is “inherently reactive, limited, and constrained,” able only to achieve “the limited goal of addressing episodic or occasional learning about scholarly or other information.”

This is most certainly the case where I work and have been recently intensifying my advocacy for a more structured and officially recognized information literacy component. In recent semesters, a select handful of faculty have been building sequenced, librarian-led, information literacy modules into their courses. These are co-planned and aligned with specific course objectives, but also allow the time and space to explore broader—portable—information literacy concepts. Such will, ideally, become the model for embedding information literacy into both general education and upper-level courses in the disciplines.

What does information literacy looks like within the context of your classes, your discipline, your institution’s broader curricular objectives? What are the chronic deficiencies you see in your students, and how might it help to add a more robust and proactive information literacy component to the curriculum? Are students relying on the go-to skills they came with, or are they being intentionally stretched and challenged to develop new search habits and avenues for obtaining and evaluating information? Are they learning to think about information, or are they just finding some? Echoing Knapp’s sentiments, the ACRL tells it like it is: “Achieving competency in information literacy requires an understanding that this cluster of abilities is not extraneous to the curriculum but is woven into the curriculum’s content, structure, and sequence.”

I encourage you to have a conversation with the librarians on your campus, many of whom are sure to have their own unique pedagogical
goals and aspirations for the curriculum. Academic librarians with teaching/instruction responsibilities, while always willing to help students with specific point-of-need information requests, first and foremost see themselves as educators, and are eager to expand that role by raising the standard of information literacy education in higher education.

To resolve that liberal education is a “course of study designed to prepare students for complexity, diversity, and change” is to understand the realities of the world our students will inhabit. The ever-evolving network of varied media and content that make up our modern information environment is, and will be, no small part of this. Equipping students with the requisite “literacies” is a must. Information literacy, then, is learning for life.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES

1. Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man’s Hunger in His Youth (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 91.
9. For information about Project Information Literacy, see http://projectinfolit.org/about.
11. Ibid.

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Against Being Inclusive

The term “inclusive excellence,” made popular by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and adopted by many schools across the country, including my own, is in some ways unfortunate, in that the concept of “including,” arguably, assumes the priority and ongoing dominance of a given reality into which one may (or may not) be granted admission. Our work in the university should be not merely inclusive, but more radically pluralistic and truly dialogical. Inclusion would seem initially to constitute an improvement over exclusion; however, it masks dominance—the power to grant or deny inclusion—and so is, in some ways, less honest than outright exclusion. It invites others to take a seat at the table, to be included there, but does not necessarily anticipate, much less attempt to facilitate, conditions for the possibility of truly novel developments—a radical rearrangement or even replacement of the furniture itself, as it were. “Excellence” cannot be merely inclusive, since excellence ought to intend an ongoing transcendence of the given, and so we ought to imagine, instead of mere inclusion into that given, a scenario wherein dialogue is a first principle, an always-already condition for the very possibility of imagining and reimagining our educational missions.

Dominican University’s mission calls for pursuit of truth, which I would argue requires deep and serious engagement with diverse others and multiple perspectives. Thus, in our learning, no idea stands in isolation. Every concept, every student, and every teacher is potentially a conversation partner. We must, therefore, advance our journey from episodic moments of diversity within the curriculum and cocurriculum to an epistemology of diversity—a way of thinking and basic posture—across the curriculum and cocurriculum. The critical and integrative thinker is one who learns enough to be able to consider multiple views, multiple approaches to a problem, multiple applications of a theory or concept; who adjudicates between them in a deliberate and reflective manner; and who develops a coherent, informed, and ethically responsible vision. This habit of heart and mind—engaged, critical and integrative, dynamic, rigorous, and questioning—is vital to the lifelong learner and ought to be the hallmark of an educated person in our institutions of higher learning. Inclusion into the given is not enough. Our journey away from exclusion must move beyond inclusion and enact a more intrinsically pluralistic first principle for construing higher education itself—an epistemology of diversity that envelops and informs all we say and do, in an educational trajectory that has a radically open future.

A story. It’s an early evening in December in the mid-1970s. I’m starting my shift at the Morton Grove, Illinois, unit of the now-defunct Jojo’s restaurant chain. I am a table server. One of my friends, also a server, arrives and says with a sigh, “What a drag. It’s Chanukah and I have to work tonight.” Within earshot is the manager of this restaurant. She comes over and says, “Chanukah. Oh yes, that’s your Christmas.” I knew that something was wrong with this picture. I didn’t have all my facts straight, but something was definitely wrong.

That’s all I remember of the exchange. But it serves now to illustrate an important point. The manager didn’t dismiss my friend. Instead, the manager sought to demonstrate understanding, to show that she knew and cared about
Chanukah and about her employee. But what does Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, the eight-day celebration of the Jews’ successful refusal to desecrate their temple at the command of Syrian Greeks in 165 BCE and to give up their beliefs and practices, have to do with the celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth? Isn’t it the case that the act of making Chanukah the Jewish functional equivalent of the Christian celebration of Christmas, in fact, subsumes Chanukah under alien categories, seeing Jewish reality through Christian lenses, thereby distorting the Jewish reality and not really understanding it at all? Isn’t it particularly ironic that Chanukah actually celebrates the successful refusal of Jews to be assimilated? Wouldn’t it have been better if the manager had asked my friend what Chanukah was? Wouldn’t it have been nice if the manager knew that she needed to ask that question, if she knew how much she didn’t know?

How much of our so-called knowledge and understanding is like this? How often and how extensively do we spread our assumptions over the world like a template, forcing whatever we find to fit? Is this what we mean when we interview job candidates, or meet with prospective students, and note the extent to which they are or are not a good “fit” for our universities? Or what we mean when we review faculty and staff we’ve already hired, or when we advise or mentor students, and even in some cases when we grade our students’ work? Do the assumptions of some set the agenda for all—forcing others to fit preconceived notions, and accepting them only when and if we can, somehow, transform them into us?

**Authentic conversation**

Robert Schreiter has identified five dynamics, five ways we fail to understand the other well: the other is homogenized (seen as not really different), colonized (the other is inferior and needs to be elevated to our level, whereupon difference will disappear), demonized (seen as a threat to be expunged), romanticized (held to be superior in its otherness, but so exotic that it doesn’t threaten our way of seeing or acting), or pluralized (a debilitating, indifferent relativism in which there is thought to be no possibility of knowing the other in any authentic way).¹

In authentic conversation, we need to avoid these dynamics and instead allow people to name themselves. That goes for the erroneous includers as well as for those erroneously included. When people name themselves, some interesting, edifying, liberating things happen.

Have you ever had a real conversation? I don’t mean the kind where you do all the talking, or where you can’t get a word in edgewise. I don’t mean the kind where you’re being sold something, or trying to sell. I mean the kind where you really “get lost” in the dialogue itself, in the exchange of ideas, the exploring of possibilities only to then “find yourself” seeing things differently. You’ve grown. What would happen if we tried to think of our classes in the university, our exchanges at work, our assessment of events in the world, in our communities, in our families, and with our friends as opportunities for conversation? In these situations, various persons, places, texts, objects, and events are “speaking” to us. They are asking questions, making claims, making connections, suggesting a way of being in the world. Comprehending what they say is, of course, crucial. But that isn’t enough. In any other real conversation, didn’t you do more than just listen passively and understand? Didn’t you respond in some way? Didn’t you ask questions, raise objections, push ideas in different directions, or relate your conversation partner’s viewpoint to what you already knew or had experienced?

In any authentic conversation, a free, thinking person puts her or his assumptions at risk by considering seriously the conversation partner, in the hope of realizing a transformation of perspective and establishing the conditions for the possibility of a less violent, more interdependent community.

We come to any moment of interpretation, of interaction, of perception and experience, shaped and prepared by a host of influencing factors, in what Paul Tillich and then Rollo May called a mix of freedom and destiny. Types of destiny include cosmic, like the very facts of birth and death; genetic, such as physical characteristics like skin color and gender; and also the array of cultural influences and contexts of personal experiences, celebrated and endured.²

Imagine a conversation. You introduce yourself. “I am ____.” The “I” of that introduction is always the product of a process, the present amalgam of impermanently related bits and pieces borne of the mix of freedom and destiny that each of us manifests in any given moment. I am the present culmination and compilation of all that. This is what I bring to the conversation. This is what I assume, what assumes me.

¹ See, for example, Robert Schreiter’s (2000) *The Challenge of Authenticity in Pluralist Education.*

² For Tillich’s discussion of the relationship between freedom and destiny, see his *Being and Event.* For Rollo May’s discussion of the relationship between freedom and destiny, see his *The Meaning of Man.*
So as a teacher, I’m not just teaching “the material.” I’m teaching “the students,” which means that I’m inviting them, each of them, with their particular present blends of connectedness to past realities, to interact with the “stuff” of our course and with each other. Alongside of or, better, enveloping the acquisition of skills and knowledge taught to them in the university, students need opportunities to be about the task of detecting and clarifying their own presuppositions, including their implicit and explicit core convictions. Students should be invited to put their assumptions at risk in a disciplined, critical, respectful consideration of compelling possibilities—possibilities they encounter, through conversation, in the materials of their studies, in their cocurricular engagement, and in their fellow learners. In conversation, we hope for understanding of the other. If something is absolutely unique, then I have no way to relate it to what I already consider to be true. I have no way to allow it to transform my present assumptions. I cannot learn from it, or even understand it. And so bridges must be built, and tentative, fragile similarities must be sought and risked. Not blithe inclusion, but hopeful and careful conversation. Not “homogenization” or “colonization,” not a “pluralization” that renders the other completely unknowable. But instead a hopeful, even faithful practice of what David Tracy calls “the analogical imagination”—wherein the other may be, at least to some degree, understood in her or his own terms, and also may be related, compared, contrasted with the self I bring to the conversation.3

Serious consideration

Again, in any authentic conversation, a free, thinking person puts her or his assumptions at risk by considering seriously the conversation partner, in the hope of realizing a transformation of perspective and establishing the conditions for the possibility of a less violent, more interdependent community. What is entailed in this second component—considering seriously? Simply put, it involves a disciplined and respectful listening to the conversation partner, without either dismissing him or her from the start, or foisting my own assumptions upon my partner.

In a memorable scene from the film The Blues Brothers, Jake and Elwood stroll into a bar and ask the proprietor what kind of music is preferred there. “We like both kinds,” is the response, “Country and Western.” When our assumptions are so rigid that they allow us to see and hear only that which conforms to our expectations, then no matter how different our conversation partner may be, we will find only more of the same. Taking stock of assumptions entails challenging ourselves, as well as other individuals and communities, to inventory honestly and assess critically the multiple elements comprising their identities, including those biases that operate when not acknowledged.

Another story: A father and son were in a car crash, and the father was killed instantly. The son required emergency surgery. The son was brought into the operating room and the surgeon rushed in, looked at the patient, and exclaimed, “My God, I can’t operate on him—he’s my son!” Were you puzzled by this story? If before reading this essay you had been surveyed on whether or not women could be surgeons, most likely you’d have said yes. But if you were puzzled by this story, why is that? Why not assume that the surgeon was his mother? Or that the son was part of a same-sex marriage family? Or another scenario? What we say we believe may not always be the truth we perform in practice, as other assumptions may instead be operative.
Unmasking assumptions and biases, sometimes something only another can do for us, is a crucial component of education, a key moment in creating the conditions for the possibility of authentic conversation and deep learning. If I clarify my own assumptions, and if I listen seriously to my conversation partner, then I must allow my assumptions to be challenged or affirmed. Every conversation is a risk and a hope. The risk is that I might be changed; and that is also the hope. The serious consideration both of one’s own commitments and those of others, which may be very different, could enrich and perhaps challenge one’s particular views of reality, leading to self-discovery and even mutual transformation.

Educators should orchestrate conditions for the possibility of rigorous, always careful, and often passionate pursuit of live options, wherever they lead. I tell students that participation in authentic and informed conversation is nothing less than an act of hope—hope in the possibility of intellectual and personal transformation, our best first step together toward emancipation of intellectual and personal transformation, our less than an act of hope—hope in the possibility of rigorous, always careful, and mutual transformation.

Educators should orchestrate conditions for the possibility of rigorous, always careful, and often passionate pursuit of live options, wherever they lead. I tell students that participation in authentic and informed conversation is nothing less than an act of hope—hope in the possibility of intellectual and personal transformation, our best first step together toward emancipation from ignorance, toward overcoming violence and bias, toward discovering who we truly are or ought to be.

bell hooks writes that the heartbeat of critical thinking is a longing to know and that children are naturally curious, yet too quickly they are educated for conformity and obedience and told that thinking is dangerous. By the time they get to college, she writes, students dread thinking. They believe they’re just supposed to consume information and regurgitate it at appropriate moments. She calls us to an engaged pedagogy that aims to restore students’ will to think, to see multiple sides of an issue, to be open to new evidence, to discover facts and then ask what matters most about them, to think beneath the surface and seek the core, underlying truths, not just what’s obvious. It is, she says, an interactive process. It is conversation. And the conversation is hampered not only by the diminishment of thinking, but more pointedly by worldviews that are racist, patriarchal, and in so many other ways biased, worldviews that teach students to support the status quo, crushing the self-esteem of some students as they internalize self-hatred and diminishing all in the process.

Indeed, conversation must today be enacted in a context of both violence and inauthenticity—violence ranging from genocide to racism and sexism and microaggressions, along with a superficiality so characteristic of our American culture. Persons seldom are encouraged to appropriate critically their own authentic identities or to discern their own personal and professional vocations, mimicking instead the desires, goals, and insatiable lust for more material things that they see others pursuing so relentlessly. When desire is mimetic or imitative, we become what Kierkegaard called “the crowd,” “the herd.”

The syncretic self
Where else does conversation’s transformation take us? I propose, in conclusion, that it leads us to recognition of the “syncretic self.” Usually people think, disparagingly, of “syncretism” as the mixture of elements from two or more different systems in order to produce something artificial. But I would argue that to have an identity is, inevitably, to be a “syncretic self,” the product of a process of selective appropriation, internalizing elements drawn from vastly varied pools of possibility. We are this amalgam, this ever-changing assemblage of diverse elements, brought together out of freedom and amid a certain destiny, an array of cosmic, genetic, cultural, and experiential influences we cannot control completely.

This recognition has significant implications, both for personal and communal authenticity and for global ethics in an age of violence. As noted already, conversation challenges individuals and communities to inventory honestly and assess critically the multiple elements comprising their identities, including those biases that operate even, and especially, when not acknowledged. It also challenges us to rethink our very notions of “insider” versus “outsider,” in terms of the many group affiliations to which we pledge allegiance. I am suggesting, in fact, that each of our “inventories” shows the influence of many places and times. We are all, and each, intrinsically plural. Together, we share that formal complexity, that syncretic, mixed, hybrid identity.

As we position ourselves globally, and as we understand our very identities to be themselves intrinsically relational, we may come to acknowledge that, if the violence of our age involves the so-called “other,” a hatred of “them,” then

To have an identity is, inevitably, to be a “syncretic self,” the product of a process of selective appropriation, internalizing elements drawn from vastly varied pools of possibility.
perhaps we can come to a newer vision, in which the self is itself already plural, mixed, hybrid, and so already in fact constituted, at least in part, by what we previously had labeled “other.” Then, perhaps we can experience the realization that the self is thereby united with every person by virtue of the syncretic nature of each of our identities. Perhaps this kind of realization will provide a way to hope and a way to move toward a future that is creative and liberating.

People say, and it is said about them: I am white. I am black. I am Buddhist. I am Christian. I am American. I am Tibetan. I am Chinese. I am male. I am female. I am human. I am animal. Identity depends upon such labels and badges and boundaries. There are times when persons need to name themselves. There are times, especially times of oppression and conflict, when persons must stand together under a common ethnic, national, or religious designation. They must stand together with a certainty and solidarity that proceeds as if these labels denote a pure, homogeneous, stable, and independent identity. So often it is necessary to stand there, and to assert this unity, precisely because there are times, so many times and for as long as we can remember, when precisely these labels are themselves appealed to as the bases of violence and hatred, discrimination and even genocide—as the reason to hate “those people.”

Yet, if the truth is told, isn’t all identity syncretic, mixed, hybrid, and fluid? Hasn’t our “center” been infiltrated by elements supposedly belonging beyond the boundary we would draw? Indeed, if we do not, ultimately, recognize the actual status, that is the constructed and impermanent status of these boundaries and these designations, we may be doomed to perpetuate the violence that made them necessary. And so, given the “mixedness” of us all, can we devise skillful means to begin again, to undo the wretched and rampant tribalisms that proceed from reified identities, which have been used to justify and perpetrate violence, a violence so pervasive that Edith Wyschogrod has called this a time of “man-made mass-death”?

As we inspire students to think for themselves, we can instill in them, as Wendy Doniger has said, not only a hermeneutic of suspicion, critically pointing out weaknesses and flaws, but also one of retrieval and reconciliation, identifying and naming those who call us to a higher and better way of being human, to moments of what she calls “transcendent unsettling.” We can seek and cite those brilliant conversation partners, past and present, who lure us into a dialogue that really does advance truth and justice. We can inspire students to lead, as Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen have written, not only authentic lives, but also summoned lives and well-planned lives—lives that combine planning and perseverance, passion and authenticity, with being attuned to the needs of others. And we can help students find, as Thich Nhat Hanh has said, their own door among the “84,000 dharma doors,” the 84,000 doors to the truth and to a truly right livelihood. We can help them explore the relationship between making a living and making a life.

Our journey away from exclusion must move beyond mere inclusion and enact a more intrinsically pluralistic first principle for construing education itself—an epistemology of diversity that informs all we say and do, in an educational trajectory that engages in authentic dialogue, lured by a radically open future. This is the how of our educational mission—how we will prepare students, along with ourselves, to pursue truth, to give compassionate service, and to participate in the creation of a more just and humane world.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES
7. Ibid., 151.
**Leveraging Innovation in Science Education Using Writing and Assessment to Decode the Class Size Conundrum**

**EILEEN KOGL CAMFIELD, EILEEN ECKERT MCFALL, AND KIRKWOOD M. LAND**

Introductory biology courses are supposed to serve as gateways for many majors, but too often they serve instead as gatekeepers. Reliance on lectures, large classes, and multiple-choice tests results in high drop and failure rates. Critiques of undergraduate science education are clear about the problems with conventional introductory science courses, and yet the problems persist. As David Hanauer and Cynthia Bauerle explain, “Given the potential for science to address important problems, undergraduate programs ought to be functioning as busy portals for engaging students’ innate fascination and developing their understanding of the nature and practice of science. Instead, recent studies suggest, the opposite is true: over half of the students who enter college with an interest in science do not persist in their training beyond the first year or two of introductory coursework.”

Researchers and expert practitioners have long proposed using student-centered, active learning strategies to improve engagement, learning, and achievement. Others have documented the ways class size is important for student-centered pedagogy. Following Hanauer and Bauerle, who recommend using assessment reform to facilitate such curricular innovations, we contend here that the better the assessment and the more focused the guidance provided to the instructor, the greater the leverage.

Our findings from the pilot study described below suggest that authentic assessment embedded in best teaching practices can show what kind of change is needed. Our study allowed us to observe the relative impacts of both class size and the use of writing as an assessment strategy, and thus to identify the sequence our reform efforts must take. The purposes of this article are, first, to report on our experience responding to Hanauer and Bauerle’s call, and second, to identify the key components that gave that “reform lever” additional power: the careful selection and preliminary testing of essay questions requiring critical thinking, the reduced size of one section of an entry-level biology course, the support of a networked improvement community, and guidance for the instructor during the testing of new methods.

**Background**

At University of the Pacific, introductory biology courses have long relied on large lecture sections, an instructional model in which “learner success is based primarily on the instructor’s ability to organize and present information in ways that enable students to learn it.” Some at University of the Pacific, like Eileen Camfield, director of writing programs, and Eileen McFall, director of learning and academic assessment, champion adding writing and other active learning techniques to courses. But actually beginning a cultural shift from the prevailing teacher-centered, knowledge-transmission model to a learning-facilitation model requires a foot-in-the-door approach to change.

The opportunity arose when Associate Professor Kirk Land noticed deep engagement and improved learning in a small summer section of his introductory biology course. Enrollments in summer biology classes at University of the Pacific tend to be lower than during the regular academic year, when class sizes can reach eighty students. In the summer of 2014, Land’s introductory biology section had just twenty-two students. He observed differences between that section and other, larger sections that went beyond having fewer bodies in the room, though that allowed
Science Education
him to include short in-class writing assignments—something he had long felt was missing from the biology curriculum and an issue he had begun to discuss with Camfield the previous spring. Believing that writing can provide a window into student thinking, Land had previously been thwarted by crushing class sizes and unmanageable grading loads. The small size of his summer class enabled him to act on his belief. Moreover, having the opportunity to interact with a small group made it possible for him to pay more attention to individual students and to gauge their abilities. In that smaller class, he tried more rigorous tests because he “thought that group could handle it,” and they still outperformed other sections.

In the fall, he approached McFall to ask whether she thought his small class’s improved results could be used to make the case for smaller sections of introductory biology every semester. They discussed what might happen if he used data from one summer session as evidence and concluded it was likely that cost-conscious administrators would attribute the improved performance of students in the summer session to qualitative demographic differences between students taking an accelerated summer course and those who take the course during the spring semester. The discussion could have ended there, but with the strong support of his department chair and guidance from McFall and faculty in the university’s school of education, Land sought to test his hypothesis by gathering more assessment data through experimental and control groups. At the same time, Camfield invited him to participate in a “networked improvement community,” a structured and guided faculty group seeking to add more writing to the curriculum. Land believes that his connection to these two faculty-centered administrators was essential to transforming his curiosity about student performance into an active analysis of student learning that would inform subsequent pedagogy.

Writing as an assessment method and learning activity
In keeping with Hanauer and Bauerle’s call to facilitate innovations in science education through assessment reform, Land used writing first as an assessment method on mid-term exams. However, his choice did more than simply reveal student learning, it improved it. Using writing as an assessment strategy provides the science instructor with a mechanism for evaluating students’ “intuitive grasp on course concepts,” which might be much more important than their recall of textbook definitions. Yet, the particular benefit of selecting this assessment method is that writing simultaneously serves multiple purposes; it can provide a window into student understanding as well as trigger deeper learning in its own right. In other words, beyond assessment, writing offers several layers of cognitive benefits to the science curriculum.

In their acclaimed book Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning, Peter Brown, Henry Roediger, and Mark McDaniel discuss the importance of priming students for learning, which might involve asking students to struggle
with a problem before learning how to solve it, and of calibrating understanding, which can help students avoid being “carried off by the illusions of mastery that catch many learners at test taking time.” They discuss how chunking, or breaking material down into interconnected subcategories, can trigger a process of continued retrieval that allows material to be consolidated into a mental model, “making one’s ability to recall and apply as automatic as a habit.” The authors observe that when students reflect on new knowledge and engage in metacognition, they can reframe course concepts in their own words and connect them to prior knowledge, which also allows learners to more effectively retrieve that information at a later time. A form of reflection, elaboration also combats the cognitive fatigue that rote memorization can engender.

Writing exercises are among the easiest ways to activate priming, calibration, reflection, metacognition, and elaboration. Further, the act of writing forces students to expend energy and commit to their ideas in ways that reinforce and extend learning and are in themselves independent forms of learning. Evidence abounds. For example, Karla Gingerich and her colleagues published a study of eight hundred college psychology students that compared the exam performance of two groups of learners—those who copied down lecture material verbatim from slides, and those who generated their own written summaries of key ideas. Students in the latter group significantly out-performed those in the former (by about half a letter grade). Moreover, follow-up tests of retention two months later showed robust benefits of writing-to-learn.
The benefits of writing in the science curriculum are not limited to better student mastery and retention of material. The writing-in-the-disciplines community has been vocal for several decades about the value of introducing students to authentic disciplinary writing that “brings students into a community of scholars by helping the students learn to speak that community’s language.” In learning how to write like a scientist, a student also learns to think like a scientist and to recognize the different kinds of thinking a scientist must engage in to describe, explain, predict, apply, and clarify phenomena to various audiences. A final, but not insignificant, reason to include writing in the college science class is that it might more truly reflect the puzzle-solving, game-playing aspects of science itself. Quite simply, writing can make science learning fun.

Further, writing can be used to dismantle the hierarchy endemic to so many gateway college science courses. As previously discussed, when Hanauer and Bauerle called for reframing science education in ways that acknowledge learning as a “creative and constructive process” that “evolves beyond what is explicitly taught,” they suggested using new assessment strategies to leverage reform. In our project, writing is potentially the core of such a reframing. First as an assessment strategy and then as a learning activity, writing may have “transforming power” because it gives students a space to digest course material, raise questions, and formulate opinions in ways that honor their voice and agency. Evidence of such benefits include studies comparing “low-structure” college introductory biology classes (featuring traditional lecturing and high-stakes exams) with “high-structure” classes (featuring frequent low-stakes practice in the analytical skills necessary to do well on exams), in which high-structure courses “significantly reduced failure rates, narrowing the gap between poorly prepared students and their better prepared peers while at the same time showing exam results at higher levels on Bloom’s taxonomy.” Assigning short writing exercises is an effective way of providing such structure.


**Class size as a factor in student engagement and learning**

While the benefits of writing in the curriculum are well documented, the research on class size is inconclusive. Some studies and meta-analyses report that smaller class size has a positive impact on student achievement, while others show mixed results. The construct and its measurement are poorly defined in the literature, but at least at the level of elementary and secondary education, the differences in class size are typically the difference between small classes of eighteen to twenty-three and large classes of a maximum of thirty-five. Studies of differences in student achievement in college-level courses suggest that the impact of class size varies, in part, with the level of difficulty of course activities.

One assumption that appears to undergird the writing-in-the-sciences literature is that writing is comparably impactful on student learning and effective as an assessment tool, regardless of class size. Our pilot study at Pacific allowed us to examine several dimensions of that assumption. By examining differences in student responses to essay questions on exams in a large versus a small section of introductory biology, we could identify the most effective sequence for subsequent curricular reforms. We could answer the following question: What should come first, smaller class sizes or more writing in the curriculum? Put another way, our assessment experiment helped us identify the core issue as one of class size, which positioned us to seek further evidence tied to this central problem.

**Methods**

In the spring of 2015, Land tested differences in engagement and achievement between small and large classes, including responses to essay questions on exams, with the guidance of faculty in the school of education and a graduate assistant. Students enrolled in one of Land’s two sections of introductory biology: a small class with a restricted enrollment of twenty-four students, and a large class with eighty students. Both sections, the treatment and control groups, experienced the same teaching techniques and the same learning and assessment activities. Land incorporated some problem-based learning and discussion into both sections, and he added writing as an assessment strategy for both. The graduate assistant recorded observations of students’ time on task as a way of assessing engagement. Land also compared student perceptions and attitudes about writing in science classes and overall writing proficiency (defined as the ability to communicate scientific thinking effectively) on examinations. He assessed student responses to one major essay question on each of three midterm exams and compared scores across both classes.

**Results**

The differences on essay score averages between small and large classes were stark. On the first midterm, the small class performed 24 percent better than the large class; on the second midterm, the difference rose to 38 percent; and on the third midterm, the small class out-performed the large class by 35 percent. Moreover, the large class showed no improvement over time, whereas the small class’s writing scores improved 11 percent by the end of the course.

For the small class, writing as an assessment strategy actually seemed to lead to improved learning—or, at least, to an improvement in the students’ ability to communicate what they had learned. An informal survey also revealed differences between the large and small classes in terms of student attitudes about writing. Students in the smaller class were more accepting of an assessment strategy rarely seen in their other science classes, whereas those enrolled in the larger class expressed resistance and resentment. Some students simply voted with their feet: exams from the larger section had a higher frequency of “no attempt/no score” on the written component of the exams, as compared to exams from the smaller class. A number of factors associated with the climate of the smaller class could have contributed to the higher scores. Land hypothesized that students in his smaller class experienced more personally connected active learning and, therefore, felt less test anxiety as they wrote essays for an instructor they knew and trusted. Indeed, although both the small and large classes were presented with the same learning activities, proportionately more students in the large section were observed as passive and off-task.

Writing as an assessment strategy showed that writing as a learning activity had a bigger impact in the small class than in the large class, suggesting that reform in terms of class size should precede the curricular shift to high-impact teaching and assessment practices. Framed another way, smaller class sizes appear
to potentiate the gains achieved by adding writing. Armed with this information, we are positioned to gather additional assessment data that will strengthen our push for class-size reform. Our next steps will involve collecting and disaggregating data to see whether class size has a more significant impact on some students over others. We also hope to explore the intersections between writing as an assessment tool and writing as a learning activity and to determine the degree to which either is sensitive to class size.

**Leveraging change**

Our results suggest that class size affects the culture of learning and influences writing performance—even when the same instructor is teaching the same material and giving identical exams. Conversations with McFall and support from his department chair allowed Land to conduct his initial class-size experiment, but these factors alone might not have facilitated other changes in instruction and assessment. His participation in the networked improvement community focused on writing in the disciplines provided the support, encouragement, and expertise he needed first to add writing as an assessment strategy and then to build on that experience to more intentionally add writing as a learning activity. Because the community included other science and math faculty, as well as both Camfield and McFall, conversation could range from particular disciplinary concerns to larger questions of student engagement and mastery. Being with others who shared a similar optimism about implementing writing in science classes allowed him to experience a culture in which writing-to-learn was possible. In short, the network galvanized his interest and transformed it into a reform commitment devoted to lowering class size in order to make writing a viable part of the curriculum. Most significantly, the benefits of being connected to a reform network did not end there.

At the end of the semester, teams from the networked improvement community formally presented their findings at a college-wide summit on writing. Because this was the first such event, the presenters didn’t know what to expect. Despite some anxieties, attendance exceeded all expectations (to the extent that the room was packed, and we ran out of food). Attendees included the dean of the College of the Pacific, the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the vice provost for strategy and educational effectiveness, all of whom communicated their appreciation of the innovative work that faculty had undertaken. The dean of the college has since followed up with a commitment to continue with networked improvement communities and to figure out how to expand and solidify Land’s teaching reforms in biology. The foot-in-the-door approach to cultural change has resulted in the door opening wide, ushering in the next phase in “engaging students’ innate fascination and developing their understanding of the nature and practice of science” and improving retention, completion, and success.

Initial assessment data gave both credibility and the kind of evidence that Land’s scientist colleagues and administrators respect—thus endorsing Hanauer and Bauerle’s call for using assessment to leverage pedagogical reform. The key components that additionally empowered that “leveraging” were the selection of writing for authentic assessment, the small class size of one of the sections in this pilot project, and the supportive formal connections forged with colleagues and backed by trusted experts. Our discoveries suggest that for tactically savvy reformers, Hanauer and Bauerle’s strategy of using assessment reform to leverage curricular change is sound.

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To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

### Notes


8. Ibid., 198.
10. Bahls, Student Writing, 8.
In Defense of Japanese Liberal Education

RIE MORI

Liberal education has been a target of political discourse in many countries, and Japan is no exception. In June 2015, Japan’s minister of education, Hakubun Shimomura, called upon the country’s national universities to take “active steps to abolish [social science and humanities] organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs.”

In Japanese higher education, there are three types of institutions: national public, local public, and private. Shimomura’s statement targeted only national universities, which are affected by national policy most directly. The message was clear: the national government wants to focus national resources for higher education on fields that nourish students’ skills that are immediately adaptable to the needs of the labor market, leaving humanities education to institutions of other types—especially private institutions, which rely more heavily on tuition. In other words, the national government no longer wants to spend taxpayers’ money on such individual luxuries as higher education in the humanities.

The first group to react to this announcement was the Science Council of Japan, an organization that represents Japanese academics. A statement issued in July by the council’s executive board noted that “the humanities and social sciences (hereafter HSS) . . . make an essential contribution to academic knowledge as a whole. The HSS are also entrusted with the role of solving—in cooperation with the natural sciences—contemporary problems domestically as well as internationally. In this light, the ministerial request to take ‘active steps to abolish organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs,’ with its specific focus on the HSS, raises a number of alarming questions.”

Then, in September, the Japan Business Federation also responded: “Outsiders may suppose that the business community that expects immediately-adoptable-vocational skills from college graduates might have urged the government to issue such a statement. However, the reality is quite the opposite: For years, the Federation has advocated the importance of broader cultivation, problem-focusing-and-solving ability, and communication ability in foreign languages for both arts majors and natural science majors.”

Two days later, Minister Shimomura publicly clarified his statement, saying that the intent is to abolish only those teacher training programs that do not require students to be licensed teachers—not to abolish the humanities or the social sciences. Though the effect of this clarification is not entirely clear—Shimomura did not withdraw his original statement—the immediate danger seems to be over. But is it really?

Historical context
This series of events from 2015 was not the first time Japanese higher education has experienced a policy change affecting liberal education. In fact, liberal education has always been the target of major political discussions of higher education management. The modern Japanese system of higher education was founded in 1877, when the University of Tokyo was established as the Imperial University. At that time, the university was deemed to be an institution in which professional education was provided through majors including law, natural science, literature, medicine, pharmacy, and, a little later, engineering. Liberal education in those early days was provided in high schools that were designed to prepare students for the university. This basic division of responsibility between the university and the high school remained unchanged for several decades.

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Liberal Education
After the end of the Second World War, however, the landscape changed. In 1947, under the US occupation, the Standards for the Establishment of Universities, the fundamental regulations governing all forms of college education, were issued. The standards set requirements for general education that included the humanities, foreign languages, social sciences, natural science, and physical education. Later, minimum requirements in undergraduate courses were set as four credit hours for physical education, eight for foreign languages, and thirty-six for other general education courses. This basic curriculum was required of all undergraduate students at four-year institutions. The design of this new national curriculum was heavily influenced by the US Education Mission to Japan. Commenting on Japanese higher education until that time, the mission observed that “for the most part there is too little opportunity for general education, too early and too narrow a specialization, and too great a vocational or professional emphasis. A broader humanistic attitude should be cultivated to provide more background for free thought and a better foundation on which professional training may be based.”

In this way, general education became a part of Japanese higher education nationwide. In the early years, duplication of content between high school education and college general education was criticized. Moreover, the former high school teachers hired to teach college-level general education courses faced pay schedules that differed from those of faculty members who taught major subjects. Over time, however, separation between high school education and college general education was accomplished, and the pay scales were unified. Nonetheless, there was an unanswered question: What is the purpose of liberal education in Japanese higher education?

A partial answer to this question can be found in the 1991 amendment of the Standards for the Establishment of Universities, which legally dissolved the differentiation between general education and major subjects in order “to enable universities to structure curricula that reflect their own educational ideals and objectives.” For the first time since 1947, the quantitative requirement for general education, based on credit hours, was removed from the regulations. This change was intended to support curricular management by individual institutions. In reality, however, the reform resulted in the weakening of liberal education at many institutions, in terms of the number of required credit hours, the number of courses provided, and the overall variety of content. Institutions emphasized language education, and some other general education courses were simply terminated. Since the general education requirement was reduced at individual institutions, students began to earn more credit hours through courses in major subjects, remedial education, or information technology.

This phenomenon may indicate that true liberal education had not been fully embedded in Japanese higher education. General education became a formal requirement in undergraduate education under the strong influence of the United States, and the requirement was in place for almost half a century. Yet, it seems that the Japanese higher education community remained unconvinced of the importance of liberal education. Once colleges were freed from the national regulations governing general education, they focused their curricula on the acquisition of immediate skills.

**Planned restructuring**

Following the 1991 reform, Japanese colleges shifted away from liberal education at the institutional level. The 2015 statement by the minister of education was probably intended to produce an even more significant shift toward vocational education. The idea behind this new national policy has clear affinities with the current atmosphere in Japan’s national universities. There was a three-month gap between the issuance of the ministerial statement in June and its clarification in September. During that time, several media outlets conducted surveys of national universities. One such survey from July 2015 found that, of sixty national universities that provided majors in the humanities or social sciences, twenty-six institutions were planning either to terminate those majors or to convert them to other fields. Another survey revealed that twenty-five of forty-two national universities with humanities or social sciences majors were planning to restructure in accordance with the minister’s statement. This survey also found that twenty-five institutions deemed that statement to be “understandable,” two regarded it as “unwillingly acceptable,”
and only two said it was “definitely unacceptable.” These figures speak for themselves, supporting speculation that liberal education has not been fully embedded in Japanese higher education over the past half century. They may also be evidence that “a kind of compliance culture in the universities” toward governmental policy has matured over the decades.

To be fair, there are many people in the Japanese higher education community who seem fully to understand the purposes of liberal education. For example, Shinzo Koizumi, the former president of Keio University, wrote that “books for immediate use will be useless books soon. . . . Spirit and culture of mankind has been nourished by books for non-immediate use.” He also quotes one of his colleagues from the department of engineering who said that “skills for immediate use will be useless skills soon.” There are many others in Japan who support liberal education. But apparently, what the Japanese have failed to do is to establish our own valuation of liberal education, one different from an implanted foreign idea.

What kind of difference do we really expect liberal education to make for students? It is time for educators and administrators in Japanese higher education—not only independently, but also collaboratively—to reflect and represent the value of liberal education in ways that will bear the test of time. In this regard, associations like the Japan Association for College and University Education, which recently established an official partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, may want to play a significant role in redefining the outline and purposes of liberal education in Japan.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES
7. “Eighty per cent of National Universities to Reconstruct Departments of Humanities or Social Science,” NHK, July 19, 2015.
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