Democratic Engagement between Universities and Communities
When Core Values Collide: Diversity, Inclusion, and Free Speech
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The diverse and intersectional mosaic of the next generation offers hope that the bonds of empathetic citizenship are emerging and strengthening, despite the countervailing forces of the politics of resentment and the rhetoric of extremist fearmongering. —Nancy Cantor
From 1818 R Street NW

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In Pursuit of Quality and Deliberative Democracy

In their groundbreaking 2017 report on *The Future of Undergraduate Education: The Future of America*, the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education, initiated by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, highlights that “what was once a challenge of quantity in American undergraduate education, of enrolling as many students as possible, is increasingly a challenge of educational quality—of making sure that all students receive the education they need to succeed.”1 Questions regarding how American colleges and universities can best prepare students to thrive in work, citizenship, and life are as old as the nation itself. In 1751, when Benjamin Franklin founded the College of Philadelphia, he sought a new model of education for an emerging nation. Rather than immersing students in the classical curriculum of the European elite, Franklin was convinced that an education grounded in the practical matters of everyday life and centered on the teaching of English and history would serve both students and society. Pointing to the need for innovation, democratic participation, and opportunities for social mobility in a dynamic new world, Franklin nevertheless believed that higher education’s ultimate goals were service to humanity and pursuit of the public good.2

Talk of higher education as a public good, of investing in society through education, and, in the case of land-grant institutions, of “promot[ing] the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life,”3 has been replaced by talk of a return on investment—tuition in exchange for jobs. Some politicians have gone so far as to advocate for their state workforce needs by proposing legislation that would base funding for public colleges and universities exclusively on job acquisition for college graduates or stripping out so-called frills—such as “the search for truth,” “public service,” and “improv[ing] the human condition”—from their university system’s mission statement.4 Any disciplines not considered economic engines are reduced to the status of mere luxuries and are in danger of being excised. The rhetoric at the basis of these proposals not only posits a false dichotomy between a liberal education and preparation for work and life, it obscures the reality that colleges and universities continue to represent powerful institutional forces in catalyzing individual and societal transformation.

If leaders in higher education are to rewrite this narrative and make progress in bolstering the reputation of the academy within democratic society, colleges and universities must be visible drivers of the social, cultural, and economic well-being of their neighbors. Being truly anchored in one’s community necessitates establishing, as I have written elsewhere, “a bilateral relationship between research expertise and local epistemologies, public and private, scholar and citizen that can serve to erode partisanship resulting from competing ideologies.”5 Yet, to accomplish this, higher education leaders will need to place discussions around skills versus content, the meaningfulness and usefulness of the pragmatic liberal arts, and the primary purpose of education as fostering lifelong learning in conversation with discussions about how we assess students and train and reward future faculty. Together, we must
identify and dismantle structures that create impediments to publicly engaged scholarship, community-based learning, and partnerships with K–12, business, and industry.

While traditionalist trustees prevented Franklin from seeing his visionary curriculum implemented during his lifetime, the ideal of broadening the liberal education of students to meet the demands of our deliberative democracy has persisted. Indeed, AAC&U’s 1,401 members understand that a liberal education for the twenty-first century mandates the acceleration of integrative learning opportunities that engage students in solving real-world problems. They also know that a graduate’s ability to think critically, communicate clearly, and work in diverse teams is more important than one’s undergraduate major, and they have demonstrated that such crosscutting skills can be developed in a wide variety of chosen disciplines, across all types of institutions. Most importantly, they recognize that opportunity results in equity only when focused on quality. Therefore, each student’s participation in high-impact practices and his or her achievement of essential learning outcomes must be considered core components of student-success initiatives at every college and university.

According to historian Jill Lepore, Franklin once wrote that he wished, rather than have an “ordinary death,” he could be “immersed in a cask of Madeira wine” and brought back one hundred years later to witness what had become of the country he loved (and helped create). What would Benjamin Franklin say today of the education offered by the diversity of colleges and universities providing access for those pursuing the American dream? What should we say? In the process of discovery, AAC&U looks forward to working with member institutions and communities across the country toward achieving our shared objective of ensuring that all students have the quality education they need to succeed.—LYNN PASQUERELLA

NOTES
When contemplating whether higher education can “recapture the elusive American Dream,” it’s worth considering—as visitors to the website for AAC&U’s 2018 annual meeting were prompted to do—how historian James Truslow Adams described the phenomenon in 1931: “The American Dream . . . is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

Key aspects of Adams’s original vision—including its basis in societal well-being and its insistence on the dignity of every person—are sometimes lost in modern interpretations of the American Dream that focus on the individual’s quest for financial success. Certainly, it’s no wonder that many Americans are concerned about money: growing disparities in wealth and income have considerable consequences for both individual and national economic security. And yet, any vision of the American Dream focused only on financial gain—just like any educational program designed merely to produce high earnings among graduates—is incomplete. College should undoubtedly prepare students to participate in the modern economy. It should also prepare them to live their lives to the fullest, and to enable those around them to do the same.

This issue of Liberal Education, showcasing highlights of AAC&U’s 2018 annual meeting, “Can Higher Education Recapture the Elusive American Dream?,” examines how colleges and universities are achieving the interconnected goals of advancing students and society. Contributors explore how colleges and universities act as anchor institutions within their communities, how the public discourse surrounding the skills gap can distract from higher education’s most critical work, and how new approaches to teaching and learning can address contemporary contexts. They examine persistent questions about the American right to free speech and envision a broadly inclusive higher education landscape.

Like the annual meeting, these articles make clear that if higher education is to “recapture the elusive American Dream,” it will need to continue articulating the connections between college learning and graduates’ success in the workplace and in life. But it will also need to reclaim and redefine achievement of the American Dream itself—not solely as a matter of private economic success, but as a public good that the people of the United States, buttressed by colleges and universities as educational, economic, and social drivers, create together.—KATHRYN PELTIER CAMPBELL

NOTES
New Partnership on Interfaith Leadership and Cooperation
AAC&U and Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) have announced a new partnership to help colleges and universities make interfaith cooperation an institutional priority and establish models for increased curricular and cocurricular experiences that enable students to navigate across deep differences in religious belief and worldview.

A transformational grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations will support a three-and-a-half-year initiative focused on these goals. The grant will fund the development of a series of institutes, workshops, and other resources that support and enhance institutional efforts to broaden, deepen, and strengthen commitments to interfaith teaching and learning. To learn more, visit www.aacu.org/interfaith.

2018 Ness Book Award Winner
The winner of the 2018 Frederic W. Ness Book Award is Beyond the Skills Gap: Preparing College Students for Life and Work (Harvard Education Press, 2016) by Matthew T. Hora with Ross J. Benbow and Amanda K. Oleson. The award was presented at the AAC&U annual meeting in January.

Established in 1979 to honor AAC&U President Emeritus Frederic W. Ness, the annual award recognizes books that make outstanding contributions to the understanding and improvement of liberal education. More information about the award is available online at www.aacu.org/about/ness-award.

New AAC&U Directors and Officers
At the annual meeting in January, AAC&U’s membership voted to appoint eight new directors: Brooke Barnett, associate provost for academic and inclusive excellence at Elon University; Katherine Bergeron, president of Connecticut College; Amy E. Ferrer, executive director of the American Philosophical Association; David Theo Goldberg, director of the University of California Humanities Research Institute; Mary Dana Hinton, president of the College of Saint Benedict; Paul G. Lannon, partner at Holland & Knight; Ralph Wilcox, provost and executive vice president at the University of South Florida; and Kathleen Woodward, Lockwood Professor in the Humanities, professor of English, and director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington.

In addition, Richard Guarasci, president of Wagner College, became chair of the board; Carol A. Leary, president of Bay Path University, became vice chair; and Elsa Núñez, president of Eastern Connecticut State University, became past chair. Royce Engstrom, professor of chemistry at the University of Montana, will continue to serve as treasurer.

Upcoming Meetings
- October 11–13, 2018
  Global Engagement and Spaces of Practice: Exploring Global Challenges across Disciplinary Boundaries Seattle, Washington
- November 8–10, 2018
  Transforming STEM Higher Education: Confirming the Authority of Evidence Atlanta, Georgia
- January 23–26, 2019
  Annual Meeting: Raising Our Voices: Reclaiming the Narrative on the Value of Higher Education Atlanta, Georgia

AAC&U MEMBERSHIP 2018
1,401 members

*Specialized schools, state systems and agencies, international affiliates, and organizational affiliates
Against this backdrop of social division, we all must push to find a new unity

We have taken democracy for granted. . . . We have forgotten that it has to be enacted anew in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions.—JOHN DEWEY

We have . . . come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. . . . Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

As I contemplate the power of civic engagement in higher education and our related responsibility to prepare students for civic action now and throughout their lives, I find motivation in the words of John Dewey and Martin Luther King Jr., quoted in the epigraphs above. Their observations are cast in a new light by resurgent expressions of what some have called our worst instincts as a nation, on view in and beyond the August 2017 white supremacist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. As Earl Lewis and I noted in an opinion piece shortly after those events, “It is our choice how we craft the narrative after Charlottesville. Are we prepared to become the architects of the future we imagine, one that leverages a diverse, democratic society?” And, I would add, are we prepared to do this (re)imagining with an eye toward cultivating empathetic citizenship—an attitude and skill set in short supply today?

New unity against zero-sum thinking

Our work in higher education—specifically, our efforts to cultivate the voice, talent, and active public participation of the next generation of local citizens in a global world—occurs against the backdrop of the long arm of history. Today’s divisive and divided social landscape, often characterized more by turmoil than by thoughtful engagement, feels like a throwback to times past whose echoes now call us to consider our shared history before charting any course forward.

Indeed, current events eerily, often shockingly, recall the Ku Klux Klan marches of the Jim Crow era; the construction of Confederate monuments, peaking in the 1910s and 1920s; and the violent responses to nonviolent protests during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, from the burning of the first Freedom Riders bus

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to Bull Connor's fire hoses turned on children in Birmingham, Alabama. In light of recent events, we remember how the fist of bigotry met the brave marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge from Selma to Montgomery, as well as so many other horrific moments when white supremacy asserted itself with violent force.

Of course, white supremacy has historical precedents in our collective American sins, beginning with the first assaults on Native Americans, extending through the forced journeys of Africans on the slave ships of the Middle Passage, and including the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Our contemporary geography reflects this supremacist hierarchy from Ferguson to Baltimore to Staten Island as young black lives are lost at the hands of those sworn to protect all of the public and as threats of deportation haunt immigrant families. The hierarchy appears in the legal insecurity of DREAMers across the country and in debates about the freedom to determine one’s own gender and sexuality. It is reflected in the architecture of segregation and the community trauma of mass incarceration, felt so acutely in my city of Newark more than fifty years after the 1967 Newark rebellion for justice.

Recent events in Charlottesville and elsewhere illustrate what my fellow social psychologist Rupert Nacoste calls the persistent legacy of fierce “hibernating bigotry,” honed in the United States and around the world for centuries. These events reveal that such bigotry is no longer hibernating, but rather is on agonizing display once again. Such bigotry is evident in the specter of terrorism used to justify racializing exclusion. It appears as our nation built on the backs of newcomers from diasporas all over the globe selectively turns its back on refugees, migrants, and immigrants from homelands that have been labeled as “other.” It is evident in public discourse that calls Muslims terrorists but refuses to identify as such those who have actually committed acts of terrorism—such as Dylann Roof, who murdered nine black parishioners in the name of white supremacy in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

In all this vicious “othering,” we see the specter of zero-sum thinking—the idea that what you have is what I deserve, and that you took it from me. This zero-sum approach is evoked when the very real plight of largely white Christian rural America—the narrative of Hillbilly Elegy—is pitted against ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse urban America, communities that sadly share many of the same economic and educational woes. It is behind the political chants emerging in recent election cycles that mourn the loss of white-majority status to the multiethnic generations now populating many cities and towns. And, most forcefully, it is behind the threats leveled against immigrants, including students who came to the United States as children and grew up with siblings born here but who now face restrictions on their futures, including possible deportation.

Against this backdrop of social division, we all must push to find a new unity. Yes, today’s injustices hark back to those of the past, underscoring how shockingly real such injustices are in the present. But, as so often before, they also constitute a loud call to reckoning, one that can mobilize us to realize our best instincts if we work together to cultivate a new generation of changemakers—one that has lived with divisiveness and yet also embraces a dynamic, intersectional, and empathetic social identity landscape.

The diverse and intersectional mosaic of the next generation offers hope that the bonds of empathetic citizenship are emerging and strengthening, despite the countervailing forces of the politics of resentment and the rhetoric of extremist fearmongering. Much as we might want those already in power to lead institutional and community transformation within and beyond the academy, I would put my aspirations for an inclusive democracy instead on the next generation of changemakers and the work they are willing to do to support each other and to build a nuanced unity within our diverse demography.

**Empathetic citizenship**

How can higher education institutions foster empathetic citizenship in spaces that engage our scholars and students and seamlessly create the public square of democratic exchange? While there are many places to start, the arts and public humanities are a key place for democratic engagement where diverse talent has a voice. Thus when a historic building in downtown Newark that had been empty for thirty years
was renovated recently, Rutgers University–Newark claimed fifty thousand square feet for a university–community arts collaboratory, Express Newark. This space is now the site of constant and vibrant exchange, creative production, intergenerational education, and community activism.

Express Newark houses small, local arts organizations like the Newark Print Shop, which welcomes all comers to learn printing; educational pathway programs hosted by Rutgers–Newark in collaboration with the Newark Public Schools; studios for 3-D design; the multimedia documentary collaborative Newest Americans; and Shine Portrait Studio, dedicated to training the next generation of portrait artists in the tradition of James Van der Zee, the great Harlem Renaissance portrait artist who had his first apprenticeship in the same building. There is intergenerational activity and artistic activism here all day, every day. It has become a “third space,” as we say, between university and community, a platform for building connections and common ground.

As we create social connection in this third space, we need to deliberately face our history and find opportunities to leverage our diversity, tell our different narratives, and build a unity that doesn’t require assimilation and that celebrates rather than threatens our pluralistic identities. We need to glance back at the long arm of history and forward to our newest generation of changemakers, learning together to unpack what it would mean to “bridge the two Americas,” as Martin Luther King Jr. called on our country to do more than fifty years ago. In Newark, this means understanding the economic, social, and racial divides that fed the Newark rebellion in 1967 and that continue today, with only 18 percent of the city’s jobs held by its residents. It means connecting the stories of our students to those who migrated and immigrated here in past generations via their overlapping struggles for opportunity.

Here, as elsewhere in the country, we need a concentrated moment of transformative change around issues of racial justice. The activities of Rutgers–Newark’s new Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Center—supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Newman’s Own Foundation—will allow such a moment to occur. Those activities, held in partnership with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, the Newark Public Library, and Newark’s Mayor Ras Baraka, will engage our next generation of changemakers in addressing the question, “What does racial healing look like to you?”

Through programming organized by the TRHT Campus Center, Newark’s citizens and students will participate in facilitated healing
circles and discussions in the city’s many neighborhood library branches and in bus tours exploring Newark’s complex migrant and immigrant histories, seeking common ground via histories of movement and displacement among both the city’s native-born communities of color and the immigrant communities established here after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Based on what emerges in these early activities, the center’s partners will mount a series of intimate, intergenerational, city-wide story circles and intergroup dialogue minicourses, as well as public art installations at Express Newark and a reading as part of Mayor Baraka’s book club. All this work will require deliberate training in the art of civic dialogue across the boundaries of race, class, and position. Thus our P3 Collaboratory—which supports pedagogy, professional development, and publicly engaged scholarship—will team up with the TRHT Campus Center’s partners and Rutgers–Newark’s communications professionals to produce media training sessions for faculty, staff, and students on these issues.

We will come together as different generations looking back and looking forward—as those who have been there, so to speak, and as those who will move us ahead, such as the next-generation changemakers in our new Honors Living-Learning Community, dedicated to local citizenship in a global world. Together, we hope to develop a stronger sense of empathetic citizenship and interdependent responsibility than has been on display in our world as of late.

**Anchors of research and action**

As we engage in collective narrative-sharing across generations and divides, we hope to build the beginnings of a new kind of democratic social unity—a “community of communities,” as Danielle Allen has called it. Such unity does not require us to become an assimilated melting pot, but rather asks that we celebrate with and for each other the advantages of our diversity. We need to walk in each other’s shoes, as four of our Rutgers–Newark students invited visitors to the New York Times website to do in Hijabi World, their video documentary of what it feels like to wear a hijab in the Trump era. We need to develop literacies about identity, just as Syracuse University’s interdisciplinary scholarly project Democratizing Knowledge does in its summer institutes held at Syracuse, Rutgers–Newark, and Spelman College with new scholars, graduate students, and community activists. Perhaps most significantly, we need to structure our intergroup dialogues to explicitly create the bridges across race, faith, sexuality, geography, and class that are missing in today’s America and beyond. If we do this bridging work, then perhaps we—faculty, students, and community partners—will be better prepared to effect the change we want to see.

Colleges and universities can find a model for change in Kurt Lewin’s action research tradition. As Lewin famously noted, “If you want truly to understand something, try to change it.” We see this action research model intertwined with social justice advocacy in the role that scholars and community activists have played in addressing the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. It appears, too, when we look back to the great Freedom School tradition of the civil rights era, and as we look ahead to the brave work of Freedom University in Atlanta, Georgia, to educate undocumented students denied access to public higher education. Publicly engaged scholarship combined with socially conscious higher education is what will best prepare our future changemakers.

But moving from publicly engaged scholarship and socially conscious education to a full-blown model of collective impact will require a substantial mind shift for higher education. It will require us to move from an axiom of “father knows best” to one where we respond to the invitation of community partners who say, “Ask us, we lay our heads down here at night.” It will require universities to truly embed themselves as neighbors in the moral rather than just geographic sense, as Newark’s famed Rabbi Joachim Prinz said when he spoke before his friend and comrade Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington. We need to see ourselves as interdependent partners—as anchor institutions, working in sustained ways not only to effect social change in our communities, but to train the next generation of students and scholars as empathetic local and global citizens.
Nonetheless, the work of being an anchor institution is decidedly place based, for it requires commitment to community, a nuanced education in local history, and a sustained willingness to be responsible for social change. It involves training for leadership those who live and have lived in that community for generations, and enabling a new generation of effective public scholars and civically engaged students. Perhaps above all else, it requires what my friend Mary Alice Smothers, a neighborhood leader in the ninth-poorest census tract in the United States, located in Syracuse, New York, urged us all to do: to ask our neighbors what we should work on. So as we keep our sights on achieving global impact, we must start locally, as Rutgers–Newark has tried to do in and with our community.

A dream of opportunity in Newark

Like many urban centers in our country and around the globe, Newark, New Jersey, is a place of paradoxes. It is filled with Fortune 500 companies, educational and health-care institutions, large and small cultural organizations, and growing investment in real estate. It stands across the river from New York City and at the center of a major air, rail, and seaport transportation hub. It is home to a diverse population, defined over 350 years and today by generations of migrants within this country and immigrants from diasporas all over the world. Newarkers have stood at the doorstep of opportunity for generations, blocked by the architecture of segregation and the sequelae of poverty, yet organized in every neighborhood to fulfill a dream of opportunity.

As a home for future Newarkers and a major anchor institution, Rutgers–Newark is ideally suited to effect social change by educating our next generation of civic leaders, professionals, and citizens and by establishing sustainable, collaborative infrastructure spanning the university and the community. Over the last four years, we have seen 60 percent growth in the number of Newark residents attending Rutgers–Newark, so city residents now represent more than 12 percent of our undergraduate population. We are fortunate to have many partners in Newark, from city hall to the C-suites, from faith-based and community development networks to the Newark Public Schools, libraries, and performing arts centers, and including a strong alliance of institutions of higher education and hospitals—the “eds and meds” of anchor institution work. What all of these partners share is an understanding that social change is long overdue and a desire for the next generation of changemakers to bring it on. Therefore, as anchor institutions large and
small collaborate on citywide initiatives to spur employment, to enhance opportunities for small local businesses to thrive, to support equitable housing, and to create pathways to educational opportunity for Newark residents, we are guided by a strong commitment to cultivating the next generation of civically engaged citizens throughout the city’s neighborhoods. These partnerships offer the ideal infrastructure for university faculty, staff, and students to join in mutually beneficial democratic engagement in our city, with intergenerational collective impact work spanning areas of focus from public health to public safety, from local educational attainment to global citizenship.

As we seek to reduce health disparities among Newark residents, we see the value of designing interventions with the full input of community members, health experts, and local neighborhood leaders, working with our Rutgers–Newark neuroscientists. One example of this work focuses on addressing the high incidence of Alzheimer’s disease and other degenerative brain disorders among African Americans. In the process of testing interventions involving nutrition, exercise, and behavior, the African American Brain Health Initiative has formed inclusive, cross-sector collaborations with local community organizations (e.g., faith-based networks and retired nurses) that will last well beyond any single grant-funded project. These networks now include multiple generations of researchers; college students studying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and high school students from the neighborhoods, allowing for the cultivation of the next diverse generation of scientists.

In the realm of public safety, it is vital to create inclusive collaborative teams to ensure that crime-intervention strategies are tailored to neighborhood needs. For example, the Safer Newark Council, a collaboration committed to reducing homicides and robberies by 20 percent by 2020, draws on analyses of crime “hot spots” compiled by Rutgers–Newark’s criminal justice scholars, as well as on-the-ground interventions by residents familiar with the neighborhoods, including a Newark Community Street Team, as they craft credible, evidence-based interventions. The Safer Newark Council is a sustained, cross-agency, cross-institution network that will remain in place for many years to come. One of its commitments is to engage a Youth Violence Prevention Consortium to train the next generation of informed and committed public safety community advocates.

There is likely no more important intervention that our anchor institution collaborations can effect than increasing postsecondary educational
attainment within our communities. Therefore, as part of the Newark City of Learning Collaborative, which aims to increase post-secondary degree holders among Newark residents to 25 percent by 2025, we and our many community-based partners have created pathway programs for middle and high school students and for those “opportunity youth” not currently in school to connect with mentors, to engage with the college curriculum, and more. With more than sixty partners, the collaborative is a permanent infrastructure for long-term collaborations with the Newark Public Schools, like a university-assisted partnership with a traditionally underperforming local high school. It works across the entire city and school district to create a college-going culture in Newark, as well as to ensure that students and their families understand the available opportunities for financial support to enroll and succeed in college.

Democratic engagement beyond borders

As the diverse changemakers of the next generation engage in their own educations and in social change efforts in our communities, it is clear that the issues facing our democracy resonate with those across the borders of the contemporary landscape. Around the globe, communities are facing shared challenges—social, economic, cultural, political—requiring border-spanning networks of engaged university-community partnerships. As we in Newark think about bridging different Americas (of prosperity and poverty; of white, black, and brown; of citizens, immigrants, and DREAMers), we are increasingly reaching beyond our city. The lessons of social change are borderless, and the education of changemakers must be too. Hence, our young jazz artists play in Cape Town, South Africa; our partners at Shabazz High School create solar kits for our Rutgers–Newark students to deliver to Nicaragua; our Express Newark innovators look to arts festivals created in Durham, United Kingdom; and our DREAMers see their lives narrated from afar in the Global Migrant Project, even as its leader comes from Malta to Rutgers–Newark for graduate work in Global Urban Studies.

Surely, this is what Rabbi Prinz had in mind when he urged us to think of “neighbor” as more than a geographic concept. And this is the kind of work and the kind of education that breeds empathetic citizenship—something that is critically lacking today. The work of the engaged university to enact democracy anew within this and future generations is what gives me hope that the “fierce urgency of now” is being reflected in our collective efforts to create the diverse, democratic society we imagine.

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

NOTES

2. The DREAMers take their name from the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, unpassed by the US Congress at the time of this writing.
What happens when freedom of expression on the one hand and diversity and inclusion on the other come into conflict?

When considering the current rancorous state of public discourse about diversity, inclusion, and free speech, I want to begin on two hopeful notes.

First, Americans celebrate diversity more fervently than their peers in other countries. In 2016, the Pew Research Center asked people in a dozen developed nations whether growing diversity made their countries better places to live. Fifty-eight percent of Americans said yes—a result more than 20 percentage points higher than the most positive response in any European nation. In the same study, self-identified conservatives in America were vastly more positive about diversity than were self-identified liberals in Europe. Conflict and controversy sell newspapers; conflict and controversy generate clicks. But we should not lose sight of the consensus that binds us.

Second, we’ve gotten through divisive times in our national history before. Many contemporary observers bemoan the state of public discourse, including discourse on our campuses, as consisting of little more than shouting matches and personal attacks. But our society has survived previous periods when some were quick to substitute vilification for reasoning, or name-calling for debate. In 1972, in an essay he titled “The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest,” the rhetorician Theodore Windt wrote about the tendency to shout for the sake of shouting, to shock for the sake of shocking. People who engaged in such diatribes, he wrote, were driven by a sense of hopelessness: the conviction that if they advanced reasoned arguments, their opponents wouldn’t listen. Windt argued that this hopelessness became a self-fulfilling, self-defeating prophecy when the other side responded in kind, so that instead of political debate, there was only “a reciprocated diatribe.” As it happens, Windt was writing about the anti-war protests of the Yippies, many of whom ended up as today’s university administrators.

I hope these two points suggest reasons for optimism when grappling with one of the most difficult, complex, and contentious issues that we face in academic life: How may we argue with one another about issues that are perceived as divisive and troubling?

Two core values

Let us consider how faculty and administrators may respond to controversy, and how we can best manage the problems that often surround a controversy—problems of legal rights and responsibilities, safety and security on campus, allocation of budget resources, and—not least—the emotional lives of our students. I also want to touch on the most intractable problem of all: how we may proceed when people do not want to argue, but instead are determined to provoke.

Every faculty member in this country, and certainly every administrator, will confront these issues sooner or later; and for faculty and administrators of color, the questions are all the more pressing. Our experience has given us an especially useful perspective that may be clarifying for everyone in the field. That perspective comes from our deep understanding that the controversies that so preoccupy us today are about two core values, shared by the academy and by democratic society, that have recently come into conflict. On the one hand is freedom of expression, the foundation of all academic life. Free speech is what enables our students to
pursue knowledge—to learn and to grow—by discussing subjects of all kinds, including the most troubling. It is the heart of every college and university, and the lifeblood of democratic self-governance. On the other hand is diversity and inclusion, which many of our institutions have evolved to embrace in our core mission and value statements.

While substantial pockets of resistance remain, for the great majority of Americans, it has become self-evident that our society cannot exclude any group of citizens and still consider itself a democracy. We must be inclusive. And for the great majority of people in our colleges and universities, it is also self-evident that an academic community that is not diverse will inevitably be superficial in its ideas, and that a college or university that fails to include certain groups will also shut out a world of thoughts and experiences. But what happens when freedom of expression on the one hand and diversity and inclusion on the other come into conflict?

As faculty and administrators of color know well, the resulting clash is particularly powerful and disturbing. A thought experiment illustrates the point: Imagine a clash between free speech and a different core value. What if a speaker came to campus and aroused animosity by campaigning against the theory of evolution, or the certainty that human activity is causing climate change? This, too, would represent a conflict of values, between freedom of expression and adherence to evidence-based reasoning. But it would not hit the raw nerve that is touched when the matter is one of identity—particularly those identities that are deeply embedded and not chosen, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender. It’s one thing for a speaker to belittle or dismiss someone’s chosen position about climate change or economic policy. It’s something else entirely for a speaker to belittle or dismiss someone’s identity. In the latter case, exclusion is at the forefront, and the conflict gets personal.

**Pieces of chalk**

Let me offer an example from my own experience as provost and chief academic officer at Augustana College. During the long presidential campaign of 2016, students, faculty, and staff awoke one morning to find that the entire campus had been covered with political slogans: *Build the Wall. Feminism Is Cancer. Hillary for Prison.* And, of course, *Trump 2016.* These messages were all around, on every sidewalk, scratched there with pieces of chalk.

If you’re like me, you might remember spending many happy hours as a child drawing on the sidewalk with chalk. The chalk gave us an outlet for our imaginations, and the means to play games such as hopscotch and tic-tac-toe. But this was a completely different kind of game. Who would have thought that an innocent piece of chalk, a child’s most basic toy, could become a tool to provoke, to attack, and to hurt? As we later discovered, there was irony in the students’ decision to chalk at night. Some students said they had chosen to express themselves under the cover of darkness because they were afraid they would be ridiculed or marginalized for voicing support for their candidate in broad daylight. Knowingly or inadvertently, we had shut down conversation on topics on which we disagreed. Nevertheless, the fact remained that many students in our community felt threatened when they found themselves surrounded by these slogans written in the middle of the night. By their omnipresence, the chalkings caused genuine anguish. The students who felt affected held protest meetings and demanded an immediate response from the administration. They wanted the college’s leaders to condemn the sidewalk messages and take action against whoever was responsible.
Suddenly, Augustana College was embroiled in a dilemma that other colleges and universities across the country were already facing. Some people would have said it was a dilemma about whether there should be limits to free expression on campus. But some of us saw it otherwise: as a dilemma about the limits on free expression when speech comes into conflict with the right of students to feel that they belong at our institutions.

A sense of belonging
A sense of belonging may be the key to diversity and inclusion. Over the past quarter century, higher education has looked closely at the fortunes of students of color on our campuses, with consideration of their retention and graduation rates as well as their experiences and participation in academic enrichment opportunities. We have seen that students of color have different experiences at our schools than white students, which affect outcomes—and we have learned that we need to be honest about the specificity of those experiences. As a result, we have started to have serious conversations about what it would take for students of color to have a similar sense of belonging on campus as our white students. We still have a long way to go. But we have recognized the issue, and we are working to close the gap.

What that means, in immediate, personal terms, is that when students return to our campuses after being away, we say to them, “Welcome home.” And it is entirely legitimate for students of color to say, “If this is truly my home, then why can’t I feel safe and respected within its walls? How is it tolerable that I should be assaulted by hateful messages within my own home?”

In such situations, there are people who are quick to complain that students have become too soft. Too spoiled. Coddled. Special snowflakes. But when the chalkings appeared at Augustana College, I could see that some of our students were truly hurt and even in shock, and I could not discount their feelings. I was disturbed myself. The words that had been written throughout campus stung me too. But administrators must act on principle, and accept the emotional toll even as we explain our decisions to different groups and leave no one feeling completely satisfied.

The fact was, our administration could not satisfy student demands for legal action. As difficult as it was, we had to explain that there are different kinds of threats, and while the aggressive, hurtful words scrawled around the campus indeed felt threatening, they did not constitute what the law considers to be a material threat—one suggesting imminent physical danger. Unsurprisingly, the students didn’t want to hear this legalistic response. They wanted to know what we were going to do to address their concerns.

A multifaceted response
At Augustana College, we offered a multifaceted response.

First, we asserted the right of the college to enforce our student code of conduct. Our institutions all have the authority to establish rules of behavior. While public colleges and universities have far less leeway than private schools, in all cases students elect to go to a college. And by choosing to do so, they agree to abide by the standards of their new community. So we applied our rules against plastering flyers over every surface on campus to the political sloganeering—what some claimed was hate speech—that was chalked onto the sidewalk. We cannot ban people from chalking an endorsement of one political candidate or a nasty message about another. But we can ban them from bombarding us with these messages wherever we go. So we established a place where chalking would be allowed, just as we have established places to hang flyers and posters.

In our second action, I made a misstep. I can laugh about it in retrospect, but it was not funny at the time. When we made our code-of-conduct decision, I sent an email to the whole college, explaining how the chalkling rules would work. I should have written that we were going to establish a free-chalking zone on campus; but in my haste, I referred instead to “a free-speech zone.” Although I sent a second email to correct the first, the damage had been done. People who wanted to score political points were already publishing blog posts with a screenshot of my original email, complaining that free speech had been fenced in at Augustana College. While I was rushing to respond as soon as possible to the concerns of distraught students, I should nevertheless have used better judgment, and I’ve learned from that mistake to read an email twice before sending it.

The third thing we did, when another opportunity arose, was to engage our College
Republicans with the help of their faculty advisor. The College Republicans wanted to invite the former Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos to speak on campus in fall 2016. Fortunately, all such invitations must be reviewed by the administration, and they must follow the code of conduct and the rules outlined in the student handbook. We fretted and debated over this proposed invitation and ultimately asked the students’ leaders to meet with administrators for a conversation. We told them that the college would not prevent Yiannopoulos from speaking. But we wanted to know: What teaching purpose did they believe would be served by bringing him to Augustana College? What would he contribute to academic discourse on the campus? And how likely would it be that he would persuade other students to adopt their point of view? If they truly believed in the positions they were promoting, we asked, why bring in a speaker who is just a flamethrower? Why not invite someone who is capable of winning hearts and minds through open discussion? And the College Republicans said we were right. By engaging them in conversation before they brought in an inflammatory speaker, our community managed to avoid what could have been a problem.

Living our principles
What we did at Augustana College was not unique, and I realize we were just plain lucky that things turned out so well. However, our approach to resolving conflict between free speech and inclusiveness can be found on other campuses.

Drake University, for example, created a statement of principles that mentions certain reasonable restrictions—the things that students should not do—but mostly focuses on the positive: what students, faculty, and staff should do regarding free speech, academic freedom, and civil discourse. This statement proved its worth when a nationally known hate group announced that it intended to visit Drake to protest a symposium on same-sex marriage. Drake’s president at the time, David Maxwell, sent a message to the campus reminding everyone that the university is a place where people should be able to debate critical issues without fear of reprisal. But in the spirit of the statement of principles, he also asked the Drake community to show that it could act with dignity and restraint in the face of provocation. The result? Members of the campus community exercised their right to assemble and speak by holding a counterprotest that was peaceful, positive in spirit, and very effective in showing the hate group that there was no profit for them in being around. The group exercised its own right to free speech, then left quickly and without incident.1

How can an institution write an effective statement of principles? I’ll suggest four components as a start:
1. Keep it short and simple, so it can be understood and remembered.
2. Keep it inclusive, so that people realize the campus community is not divided into “us” and “them,” but instead into “us” and “others of us.”
3. Keep it up to date, so that it encompasses changing situations.
4. Above all, keep it in practice. Model those principles. Principles need to be lived every day, not applied only in emergencies.

The advantage of this approach is that it preserves free speech, while making clear that not all forms of behavior can be excused on the grounds of the First Amendment. Indeed, there are constitutional limits to campus speech codes. If codes of conduct are drafted appropriately—if they take care to maintain a diversity of opinions, just as we respect the need for a diversity of people—then they can help campuses create safe spaces for historically marginalized groups without infringing on the right to free expression.
The high stakes
Our students are constantly learning, and we can’t expect them to know on their first try how to speak and interact in constructive ways that honor the principles of community. This is another reason why a statement of principles can be valuable—and why inclusive safe spaces, trigger warnings, and rules against microaggressions may be appropriate educational tools. They can help preserve an environment that allows for greater learning, as long as we also prepare our students to face uncomfortable, disturbing, or even hateful environments once they leave our campuses. Instances of debate, disagreement, and controversy are often when the best learning happens. We do well to remember that our educational missions support an ongoing process intended to result in graduates more capable of navigating the world than when they first entered our campuses.

Of course, there is an argument to be made that our students need to encounter a little rough-and-tumble discourse on campus. They need to explore and prepare for a world that often isn’t nice. One might argue that safe spaces, trigger warnings, and rules against microaggressions delay this process. On the other hand, these accommodations can help establish the sense of belonging—the atmosphere of care supporting students’ confidence and self-worth—that enables students to explore and grow and be prepared for the “real world.”

One thing is certain, however. We must be creative and sensitive in resolving the clash between free speech and inclusiveness. If we fail in achieving a resolution, the very basis of academic life may be undermined. A recent survey by the Brookings Institution found that fewer than half of America’s college students understand that hate speech is constitutionally protected. A majority erroneously believe that schools are required by the First Amendment to present an opposing viewpoint to a controversial speaker. And an alarmingly high number feel it is appropriate to shout down speakers whom they oppose, or even use violence to silence them.4

We ought to be worried by these statistics. Think about which groups, historically, have most often been shouted down or told by authorities that their opinions have strayed beyond acceptable boundaries. Those of us who belong to these groups, including faculty and administrators of color, should be the very first people to defend freedom of expression against encroachment. But we must also be resolute in upholding the value of inclusiveness—because, as we have seen, attacks on inclusiveness corrode our students’ confidence in free expression. They are, in fact, among the reasons why so many young people today not only fail to support one another’s right to free speech, but fail to understand our bedrock First Amendment rights.

It takes patience, calm, and perseverance to resolve conflicts between free speech and inclusiveness. Very often, the day after you’ve done it, you have to get up and do it all over again. And balancing these principles will take its toll, particularly on faculty and administrators of color and others from historically marginalized groups. But no one ever told us our work in higher education was going to be easy.

If we get out ahead of potential problems and take the initiative in holding frank, purpose-driven conversations with all who live and work on our campuses—and, above all, if we trust our communities enough to hold them to their own high standards of conduct—then, day by day, we will succeed in helping all our students feel that they belong, and making all our students passionate advocates and practitioners of free speech. We can do this—and we must, for the generation that takes over from us.

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3. David Maxwell described these events in “This Is Who We Say We Are,” Diversity & Democracy 20, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2017), https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2017/spring-summer/maxwell.
Beyond the Skills Gap

How the Vocationalist Framing of Higher Education Undermines Student, Employer, and Societal Interests

In the fervor to discredit and diminish higher education in general and liberal education in particular, skills-gap advocates were undermining the long-term interests of the constituency they purported to serve—employers—as well as the futures of students and society itself.

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Library in Beltsville, Maryland, I found that the figure came from a 1969 report on the hypothetical effects of a nuclear strike on the nation’s food-distribution system. The authors had estimated shipping mileage between various agricultural regions and population centers as part of this exercise, and it by no means represented a careful analysis of the distances that food actually travels in the United States today.

The second problem was that this figure came to represent for local and organic food activists a symbol of everything that was wrong with the way food was grown, distributed, and consumed. But in framing the problems associated with our modern food system in terms of carbon emissions and long-haul truck driving, it glossed over the multitude of economic, political, sociocultural, and ecological factors that shape how people buy, cook, and eat food. It also pointed to solutions that were primarily spatial—such as reducing the distance food travels between producer and consumer—instead of focusing on issues such as the preponderance of fast food and liquor stores in high-poverty neighborhoods where access to fresh produce was severely limited. In short, the statistic failed to elicit the systemic thinking necessary to address the ecological, economic, and nutritional problems plaguing our society.

Fast forward to the snowy landscape of Madison, Wisconsin, where I moved in 2006 and quickly encountered another, even more potent frame—the skills gap. Soon after the Great Recession of 2008 hit this manufacturing stalwart of the upper Midwest, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker began proclaiming that the skills gap—the idea that plenty of well-paying jobs existed, but the educational system was failing to provide employers with skilled workers—was the primary cause of high unemployment and a stagnant state economy. The national
media helped to perpetuate the narrative, with CNBC even claiming that “The Skills Gap in the US [is] Killing Millions of Jobs.”

So what exactly was wrong with the nation’s schools, colleges, and universities? According to proponents of the skills gap, it was simple: high schools were too focused on the precollege curriculum instead of hands-on vocational training, and four-year liberal arts colleges and universities were providing too many degrees in disciplines that had little value in the labor market. Essentially, the argument was that graduates of French literature or art history programs were languishing in low-paid, low-skilled work, hoping against hope that their barista wages would pay off their exorbitant student loans. As the skills-gap argument goes, higher education would better serve society by encouraging students to major in “high-demand” fields like nursing, engineering, or computer science. Underlying this narrative was the conviction that the ultimate purpose of higher education was to prepare skilled workers for the workforce, not what W. E. B. DuBois called “broad-minded, cultured men and women.”

But after a three-year empirical study of how educators and employers in Wisconsin conceptualized essential workplace skills, my colleagues and I found that the skills-gap discourse—peddled by politicians and pundits from both sides of the aisle—was just as unfounded as the claim that your broccoli traveled 1,300 miles from farm to table. As with the food-miles statistic, the skills-gap narrative was not just inaccurate: it was a potent and enduring idea that was being used to advance an ideology where college students were seen more as “bundles of skills” to peddle in the labor market than as young people aspiring to master a craft or contribute to society.

Ultimately, we concluded that in the fervor to discredit and diminish higher education in general and liberal education in particular, skills-gap advocates were undermining the long-term interests of the constituency they purported to serve—employers—as well as the futures of students and society itself.

The skills gap and its power as a rhetorical frame

The skills gap is a powerful idea largely because it acts as a frame—or what the sociologist Erving Goffman called “schemata of interpretation,” cognitive structures comprised of interconnected ideas that enable people to make meaning of events, diagnose problems, and identify solutions. In research on how frames function in social movements, scholars have found that
when ideas resonate with existing sentiments or experiences within the populace, they can quickly spread and act as powerful motivational forces for political action.6

In the case of the skills gap, two distinct terms are combined to strongly suggest a disconnect between employers and the possessors of skills (i.e., students or workers). The skills gap is doubly powerful, however, because it not only encodes these ideas, but also serves as a diagnostic and prognostic framing device, pointing to higher education as the cause of the gap and vocational training as the solution that would impart desirable skills to the workforce.

In Wisconsin, this frame caught on like wildfire as savvy politicians like Governor Walker promoted it to tap into (or create) a growing sentiment in rural communities that urban elites and public employees were overpaid, out-of-touch liberals who drained public coffers. The political scientist Katherine Cramer studied this phenomenon in Wisconsin and called it the “politics of resentment,” with public higher education serving as a highly visible symbol of everything that was wrong with “big government,” cultural elites, and the stagnant prospects of the working class.7 At the heart of the skills-gap frame was a similar disparagement of higher education, especially four-year universities and the liberal arts. The problem was simple: too many students were going to college and getting the wrong credentials and skills.

As the skills-gap frame became more prominent during and after the 2008 recession, many critics skerwered the idea as unsupported by empirical evidence. After Marc Levine, an economist at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, called the skills gap a “myth,” basing his claim on evidence that wages were not rising for welders in the region as they would if workers were in high demand,8 Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce (WMC) immediately countered that their conversations with manufacturing executives, who spoke extensively about problems finding skilled workers, trumped the “theoretical” academic research being conducted by labor economists. As WMC President James Morgan wrote, “We read the report, and waited to get to the part where the professor talked to manufacturers. Unfortunately, he did not.”9

As a trained cultural anthropologist with ample experience doing field interviews, I couldn’t pass up this call to arms. With my colleagues Amanda Oleson and Ross Benbow, I embarked on a study that was generously supported by the National Science Foundation and involved interviewing 152 educators and employers throughout the state. We visited iron foundries, biotechnology labs, small community colleges, and huge universities from the northern city of Superior to the urban center of Milwaukee, from La Crosse on the Mississippi River to the home of the Green Bay Packers in the Fox Valley region. This is what we discovered.

Key findings: skills, teaching, and hiring
1. Skills are complex networks of knowledge and norms unique to professions. One common feature of reports about the skills gap is how little attention they pay to precisely which skills are missing. In many cases, skills are conflated with the technical knowledge (or “hard skills”) required to succeed in specific industry sectors (e.g., manufacturing, health care) or occupations (e.g., quality engineers, nurses). When analysts are more specific, they may offer lists of generic competencies as evidence of “what employers want” or “what graduates need,” and these lists invariably include what some call “soft” or “noncognitive” skills such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. Yet in both cases, these skills are stripped of context, nuance, ecological validity, and thus applicability to real-world situations.

At first glance, our findings did not diverge dramatically from the claims reflected in the generic skills lists, with the possible exception of evidence we found that work ethic and lifelong learning are in particularly high demand. Consequently, I agree with the increasing consensus that in order to thrive in the twenty-first-century workplace, graduates must not only master the technical aspects of their fields, but also the norms of reasoning, communicating, collaborating, and learning unique to their particular occupations.

Our data departed from the skills-gap discourse, however, in locating skills within specific—not generic—workplaces and professional cultures. As we evaluated how engineers, production supervisors, or lab managers conceptualized skills in ways unique to their professions, we found that in many cases, they saw these skills as interconnected webs, networks, proficiencies, or ways of being rather than isolated, discrete bits of knowledge or ability. As one manufacturer observed, “problem-solving in teams is what we do here.” When production problems
arose, employees had to communicate quickly—often across specialty areas and disciplines—to troubleshoot. Thus workplace tasks rarely drew upon a single skill or body of knowledge, but instead required an amalgamation of distinct yet interrelated competencies.

Perhaps the way in which our data most contradicted the skills-gap frame, however, was in revealing that conceptions of skills are not objective phenomena that all observers interpret in the same way, but instead are deeply shaped by culture, gender, discipline, and even geography. Consider how a WMC representative described a conversation he had with a manufacturing executive:

[The executive said,] “You know, what we measure when we’re trying to hire somebody is YOTF.” And I said, “What is YOTF?” And the guy said, “Years off the farm.” And if I could summarize the skill set that’s missing [among job applicants], I think that’s it. If you think of kids who grew up on a farm in terms of work ethic—I mean, you’re getting up at six in the morning, you never get a day off—they get that, and they get the problem-solving part because if something breaks down on the back forty, you’ve got to figure out how to fix it.

For this employer, growing up in rural Wisconsin symbolized a panoply of skills, knowledge, abilities, and attributes, underscoring the fact that in many ways, skills are culturally constructed artifacts.

2. The classroom is a critical venue for reproducing skills. Employers and educators in our study agreed that the skills and aptitudes considered essential for student success were not easily acquired. A short-term training program was simply insufficient to cultivate the complex habits of mind that were truly in demand. Instead, internalizing these competencies required two ingredients: time and hands-on instruction. Apprenticeships in countries like Germany, which are widely lauded by skills-gap advocates, take anywhere from two to five years. Additionally, effective apprenticeship programs involve both the acquisition of theoretical and foundational knowledge and a healthy dose of related experiential learning opportunities.

The use of active learning techniques has long been a goal of educational reform. In an active learning classroom, students are not sitting passively at their desks receiving wisdom from lectures, but instead are actively engaged in constructing their own understanding of the material with the skillful management of the instructor. During our fieldwork we found such experiential approaches in several community college and university classrooms, with faculty employing sophisticated versions of problem-based learning or cognitive apprenticeship, or instinctively mimicking a workplace situation as a learning tool. The key issue here is that carefully designed and expertly monitored learning spaces are essential to teach, model, and reproduce disciplinary knowledge and habits of mind.

Yet in the skills-gap discourse, teaching and learning are invisible. Ensuring that students acquire the skills they need is treated as a technical problem to be solved by creating new programs and eliminating others, with student enrollment as the input, highly skilled (and marketable) graduates as the output, and learning as the impenetrable black box in between. Advocates of the skills-gap frame don’t just minimize the difficult and time-consuming tasks of teaching and learning; they vocally denigrate the entire profession, castigating K–12 and postsecondary faculty alike as lazy, overpaid, and out-of-touch public employees. This caricature dovetails neatly with the “politics of
resentment,” resulting in the counterproductive marginalization of the one profession on the front line of skills development—teaching.

3. Hiring challenges are not solely due to poor education, and hiring discrimination persists.
The skills-gap narrative purports that employers can’t find skilled workers, primarily due to the failure of the educational system to impart high-demand, marketable skills. Yet an analysis I conducted of WMC data from focus groups with manufacturing executives revealed a host of other reasons for these hiring challenges, including low wages, drug and alcohol problems, and undesirable facility locations. Clearly, the employers were struggling to find skilled workers for reasons well beyond the decision of some students to major in French literature or art history.

The work of labor economist Peter Cappelli adds another reason that employers struggle to find skilled workers: an overly stringent hiring process. His analysis revealed unreasonable expectations that highly experienced workers would fill entry-level positions, as well as hiring software that sought out only exceptional (and in some cases, nonexistent) candidates.10

But our research uncovered a more pervasive and pernicious criterion that is used to screen out job applicants: “cultural fit.” Seventy-four percent of the employers in our study stated that they explicitly screened out applicants who didn’t fit their culture. As one manager stated, “People who are absolutely perfect on paper won’t get a job if they don’t fit the company culture.” Hiring managers ascertained fit by comparing the applicants’ personalities, willingness to learn, and capacity for teamwork not to a nebulous ideal, but to something more real and exacting: the personalities and workplace routines of their potential coworkers. As one manager told my colleagues, many of his employees were rowdy young men who enjoyed hunting and snowmobiling—a set of hobbies that factored into hiring decisions.

The desire for a close fit between person and organization is rational, since fit reduces attrition and increases productivity.11 However, hiring for any type of fit not only limits the number of acceptable candidates for a job, but also likely involves both implicit and explicit bias, and even discriminatory hiring practices. Clearly, a central idea behind the skills-gap argument—that hiring problems are primarily caused by a poorly educated workforce—is inaccurate, and may even deflect from bigger issues affecting the hiring process.

Reframing the debate: rejecting the vocationalist defense of liberal education
Our research indicated that the skills-gap frame is inaccurate and incomplete. It misdiagnoses the nature of valued skills, ignores the critical role of teaching, and glosses over problematic aspects of employers’ hiring practices. Much like the claim that food travels 1,300 miles from farm to table, the skills gap reduces a complex array of issues and actors into a simplistic narrative where a single party (i.e., a failed higher education system) unilaterally causes economic stagnation.

The skills gap is a potent discourse that must be rejected on empirical and logical grounds, but also actively resisted. Tragically, the frame is not just empty rhetoric—it is being translated into policy and practice before our eyes, used in states like Wisconsin to advance an ideological attack on higher education in general and liberal education in particular. Policymakers have harshly criticized the sector as producing irrelevant research, operating inefficiently, indoctrinating students in left-wing politics, employing a lazy and overpaid professoriate, and failing to meet the needs of business. These sentiments...
have led to $500 million in budget cuts to the University of Wisconsin System, the political appointment of regents with little experience in the sector, the elimination of arts and humanities programs in the name of budgetary crises and workforce needs, and the evisceration of tenure protections and shared governance. Similar attacks have been unleashed in other states. Together, they constitute a concerted effort to dismantle one of the crown jewels of our society—the public higher education system—and must not go uncontested.

In response, many defenders of liberal education are adopting the vocationalist framing, arguing that arts and humanities majors can and do get jobs. Defenders of the sector cite reports that Silicon Valley giants are actively seeking liberal arts graduates for their creativity and thinking skills, as well as AAC&U’s employer survey, which found that 85 percent of employers value a broad-based education. Institutions such as the University of Wisconsin–Madison, recognizing the potency of the vocational critique, now tout statistics noting that 90 percent of graduates from the College of Letters and Sciences are gainfully employed or in graduate school. Essentially, the argument is that liberal arts graduates make good workers, innovators like Steve Jobs would not exist without the arts, and disciplines such as history and anthropology confer a unique set of skills that a program in engineering or biology simply cannot. Such arguments accept, reinforce, and perpetuate the framing that student employability is the primary goal of higher education.

But these arguments are counterproductive and mistaken. The vocationalist frame requires accepting the notion that students should be viewed primarily as workers, and education as the acquisition of marketable skills, all based on workforce needs. This framing also dehumanizes students, casting them as possessors of marketable skills and their socialization into a craft or profession as a technical matter. Worse, the view that education is solely about job training requires the deliberate suspension of belief about, or recognition of, a host of pressing social, environmental, and political problems, including climate change, income inequality, and the resurgence of virulent racism across the United States and around the world.

While it is foolhardy to claim that a liberal education is the solution to these problems, an argument can and must be advanced that broad education is one of the best ways to prepare the next generation to conquer them. We need graduates who understand history, including how the fall of the Weimar Republic led to the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s. We need graduates who understand sociology and how structural inequities in our educational and political systems effectively reproduce inequality along racial and class divisions. And we need graduates who are conversant in principles of biology and atmospheric science, and who understand the differences between science and propaganda, fact and fiction, evidence and faith.

For W. E. B. DuBois, the freedom to pursue a liberal education was essential for racial equality, ensuring that African Americans had as many opportunities to become doctors, politicians, scientists, and lawyers as whites did.
But DuBois was not arguing for the creation of a class of black elites. For him, a liberal education was the key to a liberated mind and to men and women who knew “whither civilization is tending and what it means.”

Defenders of liberal education must reacquaint themselves with this stance. Advocating for an integrative view that ensures students are trained in both work and life, vocation and knowledge, craft and service to humanity is the best way to reframe the role that higher education plays in society and the marketplace. 

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A liberal education should give students a complete toolbox so they will be prepared for complex problems we cannot yet imagine—problems that might even require us to invent new tools.

If we want our new technological society to be inclusive of all our students and graduates, we will need a new model of education geared toward the learning economy, where more—maybe even most—content learning takes place after graduation. To prepare students for this new economy, educators will need to focus less on the content we input and more on the potential we release, prompting our graduates to become voracious self-regulating learners. With an emphasis on helping students master the process of learning rather than only the specific content of any field, we have the chance to reimagine everything we do as we reevaluate how we deliver on our most important promises to students.

With significant change comes significant opportunity, but also risk. While most of us see releasing potential as one of the most rewarding parts of our work, we have to ask: Is this goal really embedded in our core missions? Are grades, credit hours, majors, two- and four-year degrees, departments, classrooms, and office hours essential representations of our values, or merely structural reflections of our cultures? Can we restructure our institutions around the things we know most help students learn to change?

American liberal education is essential for democracy, and the goal of an undergraduate degree has always been, in part, to open minds. But we could be even more successful in this regard by drawing on new research demonstrating the relationship between learning and change. A convergence of behavioral economics, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology suggests a new educational “three Rs”: relationships, resilience, and reflection. These three Rs can supply a new focus (the “what”), while behavioral science suggests new techniques (the “how”) for designing and delivering education keyed to the new learning economy.

A new learning economy and jobs of the future

In the new learning economy, students need to prepare for jobs that do not yet exist, in which they will use information that has not yet been discovered. While this has always been true, and is one reason why liberal education has proved so broadly useful for so long, the disconnect between our current and likely future states of knowledge has grown precipitously in recent years due to new developments in technology. This gap partially explains why the liberal arts are now seen as less practical than more vocational training; indeed, the public often perceives the liberal arts as overly theoretical or involving arcane subject matter that is irrelevant to the new world of work. But, contrary to this image—and despite our allegiance to and expertise in specific disciplines—higher education, and the liberal arts in particular, have always been more focused on creating thinkers and explorers than on transferring content.

The key to reclaiming the public trust in higher education and the liberal arts is to foreground our existing commitment to graduating self-regulated learners, and to embrace the fact that one’s choice of major matters less now than it has in the past.
and a New Three Rs
Multiple surveys have demonstrated that employers are more concerned about students’ capacities for critical thinking, solving complex problems, working in diverse groups, and writing well than they are about students’ particular choice of major.¹ A recent study by Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne predicts that many of today’s most popular majors (such as accounting and finance) may be useless in a few years as artificial intelligence improves.² Whether or not Frey and Osborne’s predictions come to pass, it is clear that picking a major based upon past returns is no more than a bet, a gamble with one’s future (or that of one’s children, as parents are often the ones pushing these bets). Deep dives into specific disciplinary content remain critical and relevant, but a student’s choice of major should be more about what will most inspire the student to change (and thereby come to understand the central process of learning) and less about which specific content the student might need later (which is also much harder to know).

In a sense, each discipline is a specific tool one might use to attack a complex problem. Physics might be a hammer, and poetry a screwdriver. But which tool will you need in ten years? If you knew that your future problems would only involve nails, you could focus on perfecting your hammering. But no one knows what sort of unstructured problems they will encounter, or whether those problems will involve nails or screws. Having a better hammer can be useful, but not having a screwdriver could be career-limiting. Thus, a liberal education should give students a complete toolbox so they will be prepared for complex problems we cannot yet imagine—problems that might even require us to invent new tools.

What employers want, and what students need, is a broad set of tools and the ability to practice applying these tools to real-world problems. At Goucher College, we have tried to do both at once by eliminating stand-alone courses that serve as disciplinary introductions from the curriculum, instead offering a series of seminars that introduce students to discipline pairs by prompting them to solve complex problems (which generally require multiple disciplinary approaches to engage deeply with the complexities). This curricular change involves a trade-off, of course: more motivation and time for application and synthesis, and less time for transmitting disciplinary knowledge.

But that trade-off is in sync with the needs of our future world, which is shifting with technology. In the past, content was available from relatively scarce but generally reliable sources, such as encyclopedias and other books; today, content found on the internet is abundant, but largely unreliable. In Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning, I focused on the implications of these changes for classroom design and the business model of higher education.³ I concluded then, and believe now, that higher education needs to rethink how we use technology inside and outside of the classroom. Moreover, physical universities need to improve and better leverage the face-to-face relationships that contribute to our high cost and are not replicable online.

Even as our new relationship with knowledge challenges us to rethink higher education, it also has the potential to create more inclusive economies. As the pace of content generation increases, new types of jobs will emerge, privileging those with the ability to learn over those with only prior knowledge. The ability to analyze, integrate, adapt, and change one’s mind will confer a massive advantage over the ability simply to accumulate information. Computers will continue to get better at storing and analyzing
data, so future workers will need to offer skills that complement these machines’ superior information-storage abilities. Smartphones have sown confusion about what it means to be smart, but colleges and universities are in a position to reclaim the notion that being smart does not mean knowing the most, but having the ability to change one’s mind, ask better questions, access new information, discern the useful from the fraudulent or irrelevant, reframe the problem, and integrate new information to transform old thinking. In short, being smart is really having the ability to learn, and learning involves change.

Admittedly, there is little that is new in these observations: the broad value of a liberal education has long been apparent, even to those who claim that a liberal arts degree is a luxury that they or their children cannot afford. The economic value of our ability to continue growing and changing, however, has increased. If we educators can free ourselves from our disciplinary loyalties and focus on teaching for change rather than conveying content, we will be better positioned to argue that studying the liberal arts prepares students for future jobs as well as life.

Learning is SWEET: designing for the brain in the body

The call to rethink education is motivated not just by the needs of the workforce, but also by new information about how people learn. A convergence of the fields of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, education, design thinking, and behavioral economics has provided substantial new insights into how learning works. In *Teaching Naked Techniques: A Practical Guide to Designing Better Classes*, C. Edward Watson and I reimagined teaching as a design problem focused on motivating the brain in the body. Just as more exercise equipment does not necessarily result in better fitness, more knowledge does not inevitably produce better thinking or more learning. More is not necessarily better—unless one actually puts one’s resources to use and learns to change.

Like libraries, gyms are most useful for the self-motivated. Many people, however, need a fitness coach: someone who is knowledgeable about the body, behavior, and equipment, but whose most valuable expertise is understanding the client. Just as faculty members may like to study, fitness coaches like to work out, and they probably do not need extrinsic motivation. Their clients, however, have come to them for help precisely because they need motivation. In many ways, the relationship between fitness coaches and clients is an apt metaphor for the relationship between faculty and students: in either case, the one who does the work gets the benefit. Watching someone else do push-ups (even intellectual push-ups) is not as useful as doing so yourself. In the end, both coaches and teachers want to make ourselves obsolete: we want to help our students find their own motivation, discover their own voices, and become able to learn, change, and grow without us. Expertise is necessary but not sufficient: the role of the teacher needs to be reimagined, from that of primarily professing information, to something more like being a cognitive coach.

Faculty, administrators, and students also need to understand that learning is SWEET: that adequate sleep, water, exercise, eating, and time are its most important conditions. We now know much more about the biology and behaviors of learning than we have in the past. A lack of sleep impairs cognitive function, but a complete night of sleep is also important because our memories move from the hippocampus (short-term storage) to the neocortex (long-term memory) primarily during the last two hours of the night. Water and
exercise both foster the production of the protein BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), which then collects in pools near brain synapses to stimulate every aspect of learning. T seems like it might be for teaching, but time is more important, because learning requires work. Again, as with fitness, learning is highly correlated with effort and time on task.

A cognitive coach can apply this improving understanding of brain biology to designing better pedagogy. Consider, for example, how the brain evaluates all impulses for threat. The emotion-controlling amygdala is close to the spinal cord, prompting us to take immediate fight-or-flight action before analytically processing the beauty or speed of the panther charging toward us. In the forest or savanna, the reward of living longer vastly outweighs the risk of being mistaken about the source of a moving shadow. In the classroom, however, the risk of short-circuiting the often slower-processing neocortex can entirely defeat the purpose. Each person’s entry point and motivation are different, and good teachers anticipate where anxiety or fear will inhibit learning.

Video game designers use precisely this understanding of our cognitive processes to design entertainment that encourages players to stay engaged (by adapting to our individual skill levels), to try new things (by rewarding those who learn from failure), and ultimately to master information and move on to the next level (where challenges become more complex). In other words, games are designed to be excellent learning systems. A private tutor or personal fitness coach who adjusts and motivates one’s learning at every instant is equally effective, but not scalable. Behavioral science, however, suggests the possibility that we might design systems that can nudge larger groups of students into better behaviors.

**A new three Rs:**

relationships, resilience, and reflection

The demands of the new economy and our new understanding of the biology of learning suggest that the focus of education could fruitfully be reimagined around a new three Rs of relationships, resilience, and reflection. To expand opportunities for our most vulnerable students, we need to ensure that they are able to understand and direct the learning process themselves—that is, that they become self-regulated learners. We need to replace a focus on content with a focus on process. Content and information are the bones that allow us to stand, but we also need muscles in order to move. We need to deliver content in ways that make visible to students the processes they will use to guide their own future learning.

While discomfort and even failure are essential for learning, our biology determines that they can only result in learning when there is no threat. This is why the first R is for relationships. If we feel confident and understood, we can be motivated to explore further, to do the work that only we can do to learn. Relationships—specifically, having a mentor or someone who believes in your potential—have been demonstrated to matter more than any knowledge acquired in college in measures of lifetime well-being, including financial and physical health.

We have started to learn how to measure resilience, the second R. Angela Duckworth has developed a new “grit” scale that seems to predict success in a range of activities. Carol Dweck has written about the importance of moving from a fixed to a growth mind-set. We know that resilience usually improves with age and that the military can have a positive effect on that growth. It seems clear that believing in your potential, even in the face of failure, is important, especially in an economy where what you can learn is even more important than what you already know. Building on this work to understand how resilience can be improved will be critical.

If learning is ultimately about change, then it requires the third R, reflection. Computers are good at scale and volume of content, but real learning is about integration: new information changes our understanding of what we thought we knew. Integrating new information is difficult, because human beings have strong confirmation and optimism biases. While useful in building human society during an era of slow change, these biases make changing our minds difficult. They explain why so many people still treat the “entry fobs” for their new cars as though they are traditional keys, removing the device from a pocket or purse as they approach the car even though such action is no longer necessary. The real learning comes as we reflect on the idea that the object is not a key, but a personal identity device. To prompt students
toward such reflection, educational institutions are now widely implementing research on metacognition and mindfulness, including my own practical contribution of “cognitive wrappers” (single-sheet ungraded surveys given to students along with feedback about papers or assignments to prompt metacognitive reflection).15

The sequence of the three Rs also matters. Relationships have to come first. Once students feel safe, they are more willing to explore cognitive discomfort, build resilience, and eventually reflect on how new information changes their assumptions and biases. Our economy will only become more inclusive when our graduates are comfortable with this cycle and resilient enough to change their minds repeatedly.

**Behavior and nudges**
The fields of financial planning and health care have already benefited from behavioral economics and nudge theory; we know, for example, that the likelihood of positive outcomes increases with automation of one’s retirement savings or of medical appointment scheduling.16 If teaching is largely about designing systems that motivate students to do the work of learning, then how might nudges be applied to education?

Economists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper have demonstrated that when consumers have too many choices, they may stop and sample more, but they buy less.17 More is not always better for our brains, and choice architecture can influence the quality of our decisions. If too many types of jam can be overwhelming to consumers, then how must first-year students feel when confronted with thousands of courses? Why not ask students a few questions about their experiences, interests, and aspirations and then provide a default schedule that puts them on the best path toward timely graduation? Students could certainly make changes to the default, but they might make better choices with a different decision structure.
Nudges and behavioral science might also have applications in areas beyond registration. Consider, for example, orientation and new residence halls. Students now arrive on campus carrying their high school friends with them on their phones. As a result, social isolation and social media anxiety are increasing alongside the fear of missing something back home. How might we nudge students to spend less time with their old friends and more time being uncomfortable making new ones?

At Goucher, we used data to answer a simple related question: if the goal is better retention, should first-year students be housed in singles, doubles, triples, or quads? Students and parents are increasingly requesting singles, and those who can afford it are willing to pay a substantial premium. But singles, which are socially isolating, are the worst place for first-year students. Students who live in singles are more likely to transfer away, often moving closer to home. Triples are the next worse in terms of retention outcomes, as they may create a two-against-one dynamic.

School administrators are often accused of treating students as customers. But in our data on housing, Goucher saw a strategy for giving students what they need, not what they want. In fall 2016, we opened the first of three buildings in Goucher's new first-year village, each designed with smaller and narrower double rooms, larger lounges, a common kitchen, big screens and faster internet in public spaces, an airy laundry room on the main floor, centralized bathrooms, and other design elements that nudge students toward spending more time with others. These design nudges seem to have worked: our initial data show higher grades and retention for students living in the new residence hall.
than for their peers in other housing options without these design features.\footnote{18}

Student housing designed to support retention is only the beginning, and we are now asking how we might coax students into better learning behaviors. How can we encourage students to drink more water or build the relationships that will make them more resilient and able to reflect on their own learning? If the three Rs constitute the “what” of a new educational focus, behavioral science can provide the “how.” Other colleges and universities may want or need to focus on different behaviors and different nudges, but there is a growing body of research to inform how we guide student choices for improved outcomes. It is an aspect of design that needs our attention.

We have left the information age and entered the learning economy, where expanding our students’ potential to guide their future learning has more value than simply increasing what they know. Knowledge is more readily available today than ever before, but it becomes the raw material of economic power only when we are learning, integrating, and changing. Teaching is a design problem where the goal is motivating students to do the work only they can do, and the new three Rs define a process for producing self-regulated learners ready to adapt and solve the complex problems of the future. With our new understanding of how the brain works and of the behaviors most needed for learning, nudges can help us redesign the structures of higher education.

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Notes
Each of these findings underscores the rewards of educating and informing “the whole mass of the people,” as our nation’s founders prescribed.

We are called DREAMers, but our parents dreamed long before we did of a better future.¹

Countless mothers and fathers have left behind familiar landscapes, beloved family and friends, and the comfort of certainty to give their children lives better than their own. It’s no coincidence that many of these parents chose as their new home the United States of America, a country founded on the promise of public education. “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and be willing to bear the expenses of it,” John Adams once pronounced.² “Educate and inform the whole mass of the people,” Thomas Jefferson agreed, as “they are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”³ Shared knowledge and common ideals have allowed our nation of immigrants to rise together.

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But more than two hundred years after our country’s birth, we continue to debate exactly who this “whole mass of the people” should include. Last fall, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which has allowed approximately eight hundred thousand undocumented immigrants to live, learn, and work in America, would be terminated.⁴ DACA students—brought here by their parents as children—now face expulsion not only from our public schools and universities, but from our country’s long-standing definition of what makes America “whole.”

The proud home to an estimated one thousand undocumented students, California State University–Fullerton was one of the first campuses in California to establish a center to embrace and support undocumented students. To better serve these students—known as DREAMers—we have conducted research on their educational experiences and attainment. Our findings? That by investing in DREAMers and championing “the education of the whole people,” Cal State Fullerton is on to something.

### Access to education

More than thirty-five years ago, in Plyler v. Doe, the Supreme Court confirmed that “unprotected immigrants” were entitled to a public K–12 education under the Fourteenth Amendment. The State of California has gone even further, steadily enacting protections and financial relief to ensure undocumented students’ access to higher education. The 1982 “Leticia A” court ruling, for instance, named for a California State University (CSU) student, allowed the...
University of California (UC) and CSU systems to consider undocumented students as residents, qualifying for both in-state tuition and state financial aid, until its repeal in 1991.5

After the federal Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 placed restrictions on states’ residency requirements and in-state tuition benefits,6 California was one of several states to enact legislation restoring these benefits. In 2001, Governor Gray Davis approved California’s Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), which allows undocumented students who meet specific criteria to pay in-state tuition at any of California’s higher education institutions, including the UC and CSU systems and California community colleges.7 California remains one of several states to retain such in-state tuition-eligibility provisions.8

Two additional state laws were enacted in 2011 to build upon AB 540. Called the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, they allow college students who were brought to the United States without an immigration status—and who have attended school on a regular basis and otherwise meet in-state tuition and grade point average (GPA) requirements—to apply for non-state-funded scholarships (AB 130) and state-funded financial aid (AB 131).9

Undocumented students received another boost in 2012 with the creation of DACA. Implemented by executive order by President Barack Obama, the policy provided temporary protection from deportation for immigrants brought to the United States as children in the form of renewable two-year permits. But in June 2017, a group of state officials threatened a federal lawsuit over DACA’s constitutionality.10 In September 2017, US Attorney General Sessions announced that new DACA applications would no longer be accepted, and the legal status for those currently in the program, including permits to work and attend school, would begin expiring in March 2018.11 (In January 2018, a federal judge temporarily blocked the Trump administration’s efforts to end DACA and ordered the federal government to resume accepting DACA renewal applications, but no new DACA applications are being accepted as of this writing.)12

If the DACA rescission holds, 2.1 million potential DACA beneficiaries, including the sixty-five thousand undocumented students who graduate from high school and ten thousand who graduate from college every year,13 stand squarely in the path of a life-changing tidal wave. Of the approximately eight hundred thousand children, teens, and young adults who have received DACA status nationwide, 242,339 live in California.14 An estimated 72,300 undocumented students are enrolled in California’s public colleges and universities—including 60,000 at community colleges, 8,300 in the CSU system, and 4,000 in the UC system—and half of these students likely have DACA protection now.15

Studies have shown that DACA has improved the lives of its recipients and their families, ensuring stability and upward mobility while extending benefits to our communities and nation. In August 2017, in the largest study to date of DACA recipients, researchers analyzed the economic, employment, educational, and societal experiences of 3,063 respondents from forty-six states and the District of Columbia. Results showed that DACA recipients have continued to make positive contributions to the economy, boosting tax revenue and spurring economic growth that benefits all Americans. Ninety-seven percent of respondents were currently employed or enrolled in school.16

Titan DREAMers
During fall 2017, approximately one thousand undocumented AB 540 students called Cal State Fullerton home. Because of its sizeable undocumented population and the university’s long-standing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, Cal State Fullerton became, in 2014, the first campus in the CSU system—and one
of the first campuses in the country—to establish a physical space to support undocumented students.\textsuperscript{17} Housed within the Diversity Initiatives and Resource Centers department in the Division of Student Affairs, the Titan Dreamers Resource Center (TDRC) provides undocumented students with a home away from home, in which they can meet peers and build a sense of belonging and community.

According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, undocumented students face a tough uphill climb to their college degrees. Usually the first in their families to attend college, undocumented students are less likely to be academically prepared or to have a basic understanding of the college experience. They are ineligible for federal financial aid and other federally funded benefits, may lack family income and support, often experience guilt and shame for attending college, and work more hours per week than their peers while having less disposable income. Undocumented students are typically less likely to engage in extracurricular activities on campus and are more likely to take a leave of absence from college. All the while, undocumented students may face a constant fear of deportation—for themselves or family members.\textsuperscript{18}

To help eliminate these obstacles, Cal State Fullerton’s TDRC provides workshops and programs that assist and support undocumented students to ensure they enjoy a full and equitable college experience. Programs and services include assistance with the AB 540/2000 Affidavit Form; California DREAM Act application workshops, in which students receive one-on-one support when applying for state and institutional financial aid; immigration legal clinics, where students and their family members receive pro bono legal assistance from reputable immigration attorneys to explore pathways to residency; identity empowerment workshops; counseling and psychological services; and many other offerings.

As researcher William Perez has noted, “for college-going undocumented students, support networks help them navigate the process of higher education.” Further, support provided to undocumented students by faculty and staff “plays a key role in maintaining high levels of optimism and perseverance.”\textsuperscript{19} Supporting undocumented students must remain an institutional responsibility and priority. For this
A study of support

In 2017, Cal State Fullerton set out to measure the results of our campus-wide investment in undocumented students by examining whether the educational experiences and attainment of DREAMers—despite the unique obstacles they face—are comparable to those of their counterparts. In our study, we defined a DREAMer as an undocumented student who had AB 540 status.

Our data came from first-year students and seniors who responded to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) during spring 2014 or 2016. The total sample included 5,328 students: 1,765 first-year students (including 57 undocumented AB 540 students) and 3,563 seniors (including 77 undocumented AB 540 students).

Using NSSE data, we compared DREAMers and non-DREAMers on the number of times they participated in high-impact practices such as service learning and research (table 1) and on engagement indicators such as higher-order learning and civic engagement (table 2).

We ran a series of independent-sample t-tests and chi-square analyses for the engagement indicators and for participation in high-impact practices. Next, we ran multiple regression analyses with college GPA as a dependent variable. Independent variables included DREAMer status, high school GPA, SAT score, gender, Pell recipient status, ethnicity, first-generation status, engagement indicators (grouped according to themes specified by NSSE, as shown in table 2), and participation in high-impact practices.

We conducted separate analyses for first-year students and seniors. Because NSSE was administered to first-year students and seniors in 2014 and 2016, and the TDRC was founded in 2014, we expected that first-year DREAMers would have benefited more strongly from TDRC services than senior DREAMers. Therefore, we hypothesized that the DREAMers would score higher on various engagement indicators and participation in high-impact practices than non-DREAMers among first-time first-year students but not among seniors.

Findings

Concerning engagement indicators among seniors, we found that DREAMers scored significantly higher than non-DREAMers on self-reported higher-order learning (15 percentage difference), quantitative reasoning (14 percentage difference), and civic engagement (8 percentage difference). Among first-year students, we found that DREAMers scored higher than non-DREAMers on self-reported higher-order learning (11 percentage difference), reflective and integrative learning (12 percentage difference), student-faculty interaction (35 percentage difference), effective teaching practices (10 percentage difference), supportive environment (14 percentage difference), and civic engagement (16 percentage difference). Similarly, we found that while senior DREAMers were no more likely than non-DREAMers to participate in high-impact practices, first-year DREAMers were more likely to participate in research with faculty (7 percent participated) and service learning (17 percent participated) versus first-year non-DREAMers (2 percent and 8 percent participated, respectively).

Finally, using multiple regression analysis to test whether DREAMer status and other factors...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Example Survey Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme: Academic Challenge</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher-order learning</td>
<td>During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following: Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective and integrative learning</td>
<td>During the current school year, how often have you: Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning strategies</td>
<td>During the current school year, how often have you: Identified key information from reading assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quantitative reasoning</td>
<td>During the current school year, how often have you: Reached conclusions based on your own analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)</td>
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<td><strong>Theme: Learning with Peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative learning</td>
<td>During the current school year, how often have you: Asked another student to help you understand course material</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussions with diverse others</td>
<td>During the current school year, how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups: People from a race or ethnicity other than your own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme: Experiences with Faculty</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student-faculty interaction</td>
<td>During the current school year, how often have you: Talked about career plans with a faculty member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective teaching practices</td>
<td>During the current school year, to what extent have your instructors done the following: Clearly explained course goals and requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme: Campus Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of interactions</td>
<td>Indicate the quality of your interactions with the following people at your institution: Student services staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive environment</td>
<td>How much does your institution emphasize the following: Providing support to help students succeed academically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme: Civic Engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic engagement (created from four Perceived Gain Scale items)*</td>
<td>How much has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas: Being an informed and active citizen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See Note 21 for a discussion of how we measured civic engagement.
significantly predicted student GPA, we found that the predictors collectively explained 25 percent of GPA variance among first-year students and 15 percent among seniors. Table 3 summarizes the results. First-year GPAs were significantly predicted by gender, underrepresented ethnicity, major, SAT, and high school GPA; senior GPAs were significantly predicted by underrepresented ethnicity, on-campus employment, major, high-impact practices, and campus environment. Most importantly, however, DREAMer status was not significantly associated with GPA after controlling for demographic and academic factors.

**Conclusion**
In short, our study found that Cal State Fullerton’s DREAMers have achieved GPAs comparable to those of their non-DREAMer peers when controlling for academic preparation and demographic factors. Consistent with our hypothesis, first-year DREAMers, who matriculated after the TDRC was founded in 2014, scored higher than non-DREAMer peers on six of eleven NSSE engagement indicators; such striking differences were not observed among seniors. Among both first-year students and seniors, however, DREAMers consistently outpaced non-DREAMer peers on higher-order learning and civic engagement. First-year DREAMers especially were more likely to engage in service learning and to participate in research projects with faculty members. Each of these findings underscores the rewards of educating and informing “the whole mass of the people,” as our nation’s founders prescribed.

In considering the roots of these findings, we can’t ignore the cultural experiences of our DREAMers who, without the clear pathways, certainty, and safety nets enjoyed by non-DREAMers, have had to show uncommon initiative and resourcefulness in carving out their own futures.

| Table 3. Summary of multiple regression analyses using GPA as the dependent variable |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Predictor                       | First-Year | Senior |
| DREAMer Status                  |          |        |
| Gender (Male)                   | (-)     |        |
| Underrepresented Ethnicity      | (-)     |        |
| Pell Grant Recipient            |          |        |
| First Generation                | (-)     |        |
| On-Campus Employment            | (+)     |        |
| STEM/Business Major             | (-)     | (-)    |
| High School GPA                 | (+)     | n/a    |
| SAT                             | (+)     | n/a    |
| High-Impact Practices (NSSE)    | (+)     | n/a    |
| Engagement Indicators (NSSE):   |         |        |
| Campus Environment              | (+)     |        |

Note: +/- signs indicate the direction of the significant relationships with GPA (i.e., whether a particular factor was associated with a higher or lower GPA).

We can’t ignore the cultural experiences of our DREAMers who, without the clear pathways, certainty, and safety nets enjoyed by non-DREAMers, have had to show uncommon initiative and resourcefulness in carving out their own futures. Continued access, campus support, and focused study into the unique needs, strengths, and contributions of our undocumented families are vital—so that we may all continue to rise together.

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NOTES
21. “NSSE Engagement Indicators,” National Survey of Student Engagement, accessed March 19, 2018, http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/engagement_indicators.cfm. In addition to measuring students’ engagement using NSSE’s engagement indicators, we measured civic engagement using a composite of four items from NSSE’s Perceived Gain scale, which measures student perceptions of how much their college experiences contributed to their skills and personal development. These four items included working effectively with others, understanding people of other backgrounds, being an informed and active citizen, and developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics.
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES have become practiced in articulating the value of diversity in relation to their institutional missions. Less often considered, at least in the context of many educators’ daily lives, is the corresponding value of diversity across the higher education landscape. Yet as Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has written, “One of American higher education’s greatest strengths is its diversity of institutional types—from community and state colleges and research universities, tribal colleges and historically black colleges and universities to faith-based and single-sex institutions, independent four-year colleges and online universities. . . . [T]hough the missions of these various institutions of higher education may be distinctive, they are united by the shared goals of educating students and advancing knowledge.”

AAC&U’s membership comprises a range of institutions that share these essential goals. Those who interact with AAC&U regularly may be attracted to its meetings, projects, and publications for this very reason, eager to see what models of assessment and general education reform are emerging from institutions nothing like their own and excited to grapple with the complexity of translating other institutions’ innovations into workable strategies on their campuses. In fact, the association’s membership has no majority among Carnegie classifications: at last count, its 1,401 institutional members were 29 percent master’s-degree-granting institutions, 23 percent baccalaureate-degree-granting institutions, 17 percent doctorate-degree-granting institutions, 13 percent associate’s-degree-granting institutions, and 18 percent “other” (a category that includes specialized schools, state systems and agencies, international affiliates, and organizational affiliates).

A glance at these numbers makes clear that despite AAC&U’s broad inclusivity, one sector in particular—community colleges—is underrepresented among AAC&U members in relation to the nearly 40 percent of American students that these institutions enroll. Certainly, AAC&U’s membership numbers belie the influence that community colleges have within the association and their role in advancing the very cornerstone of its work—guaranteeing a high-quality liberal education for all students, at all institutions. At the same time, there is more to be done to ensure that community college faculty and administrators see themselves in AAC&U’s work. Indeed, AAC&U benefits deeply from the dedicated efforts of individuals at community colleges: the faculty member at the Community College of Rhode Island who does signature work with her students; the history professor at Germanna Community College who implemented a common assignment focused on civic engagement across multiple humanities courses; the community college leader from Upstate New

MATT REED AND KATE DREZEK McCONNELL

The Indispensable Work of Community Colleges

The Conversations We Should Be Having

We look to community colleges as critical partners in higher education’s work to define and drive forward our shared pursuit of our students’ American Dreams

MATT REED is vice president for learning at Brookdale Community College and author of Inside Higher Ed’s “Confessions of a Community College Dean” blog. KATE DREZEK McCONNELL is senior director for research and assessment at the Association of American Colleges and Universities.
York who promotes liberal education and related essential learning outcomes but avoids the language of liberal education with her board and workforce development advisory groups; the faculty member from Lee College in Texas who does signature work with prisoners under the auspices of an offender education program.

To surface the unique aspects of these and other community college experiences, we decided to offer a session at AAC&U’s 2018 annual meeting that would, at minimum, provide an opportunity to begin to unpack how best to underscore and strengthen the connections between AAC&U’s mission of promoting quality and equity as the foundations of excellence in undergraduate education and the critical work of the administrators, faculty, and staff who lead America’s community colleges.

Together, drawing from our respective positions as vice president for learning at Brookdale Community College (Matt) and as senior director for research and assessment at AAC&U (Kate), we hoped to connect the dots and deliver on AAC&U’s potential to reflect the experiences of the association’s community college members.

Stepping up to the challenge

Our goal in designing the session was to create a welcoming space for community college leaders at AAC&U’s annual meeting by offering a session focused specifically on the conversations they wanted to have. AAC&U regularly involves and features community college educators in its publications, meetings, and projects; nonetheless, the association is not on the radar of many community college leaders, who might see its focus as being of limited relevance to their worlds and, moreover, might feel that community colleges have relatively muted voices within the association.

More than anything else, we wanted to make sure that AAC&U and its members at four-year colleges and universities weren’t missing an opportunity to learn from a critical peer group. Community colleges may have a different angle on certain questions than many four-year colleges do, but their concerns are just as real. And because so many students interact with community colleges at some point in their educations, any serious effort to improve liberal education needs to include them.

Ambitiously, we titled our session “Community Colleges, Quality, and Student Success: The Conversations We Should Be Having.” Neither of us knew what to expect from the presentation. Not knowing who the session description would attract, or what interests they would bring, we decided to run the session as a guided discussion. To create an initial crowd-sourced list of questions and topics, we sent an email to all annual meeting registrants from community colleges and used their feedback to develop a set of prompts. We deliberately phrased these prompts somewhat polemically in the hopes of prodding responses that could lead to a robust exchange:

- Community colleges were designed to build a middle class for a country that no longer wants one.
- Transfer is workforce.
- Community colleges should fold themselves into four-year colleges.
- A free sophomore year is a viable alternative to fully free community college.
- Community is the blessing, and the curse, of community colleges.

Drawing on his perspective as a community college vice president—and as someone who has been relatively uninvolved with AAC&U over the years, for many of the reasons stated above—Matt prepared some remarks on each topic, which he planned to share at the beginning of the session. By running through the prompts and offering brief glosses on each, we hoped to see what would catch on among the forty to fifty people in the room. After Kate provided an introduction, Matt walked through the first few prompts uneventfully.

The audience members seemed to be biding their time. Then someone asked the question...
that broke the dam: “What do you think about remediation?” Apparently, everybody in the room had thoughts on the topic, as well as the desire to share those thoughts immediately. The room began to resemble the scene in Airplane II when the flight attendant announced that the plane had run out of coffee.

Responding to the question, Matt observed that a consensus has emerged in the last few years that remedial (also called “developmental” or “foundational”) courses often do more harm than good. This unintended consequence appears to be a function primarily of two factors: relatively poor accuracy in placement testing, and the added time and resources required to complete additional semesters appended to a course of study. As reflected in the title of an influential Complete College America report, time is the enemy: the longer a course of study takes, especially for students with complicated lives, the more opportunity for life to get in the way.¹ That counterintuitive finding—backed by empirical research by the Community College Research Center and documented in Redesigning America’s Community Colleges, among other places⁴—has placed a new premium on models that streamline, reduce, or completely bypass traditional remedial coursework.

Most participants were eager to share their experiences with remediation on their own campuses. Matt mentioned the Accelerated Learning Program, a corequisite model for English developed at the Community College of Baltimore County that is gaining purchase nationally. Others described best practices but also challenges and frustrations that turned out to be shared among those in the room.

Sounding the depth of unrealized opportunity

AAC&U is known for its work on the value of liberal education, so it’s not illogical to associate issues like remediation with venues that focus more narrowly on the institutional issues facing community colleges, such as the American

Brookdale Community
College
But as the audience delved into the topic of remediation, they illuminated points of connection among these putatively different areas of work.

First, in a sense, remedial education is general education in its purest form. Both involve ensuring that students develop a set of skills assumed to be common to all (or nearly all) fields of higher education. But discussions about general education and remedial education typically occur in separate venues. General education is often discussed in aspirational terms, remedial education as an institutional or economic problem. Over the last five to ten years, as many faculties have delved into all aspects of the general education curriculum through curricular redesign efforts, the actual content of remediation has been treated as a kind of black box.

This practice of minimizing discussions of remediation persists even at a moment when foundations and states have placed great emphasis on ways to get students through or around remediation more quickly. As college costs have grown more rapidly than wages, the real cost of extending the time to degree has increased. And student loan repayment data show that the students with the most trouble repaying their loans as a group are those students who drop out before completion, with nothing to show for their efforts. After decades of relatively little attention paid to graduation rates, the new focus on student completion in the community college sector is overdue.

But treating some faculty members’ lifework as a problem to be minimized or avoided entirely—as recent approaches to remediation via state policy have—means that some outstanding innovations within remedial education don’t get the recognition they deserve. Judging by the enthusiasm, and palpable frustration, with which faculty in the room described what they are doing on their campuses, there is no shortage of good work being done. But much of it is staying local, and our national discourse is the worse for it.

And when the national discourse suffers, so do our students. The majority of new students at community colleges place into at least one remedial class. The sheer size of that cohort suggests that it’s worth noticing. From a social equity perspective, we know that higher percentages of students of color and low-income students are enrolled in remediation than their white or high-income peers. These are the students most in need of a robust general education, as well as specific job skills. This cohort is where the battle for the educational future will be won or lost.

Moving the conversation forward

On its surface, the conversation at our annual meeting session was about remediation, with all its attendant history, politics, practices, and challenges. But it was also about much more than that.

Over the course of the session, multiple dynamics surfaced, including differences in approach based on state policy, funding models, size, and location (urban versus suburban versus rural). Individuals spoke up to directly challenge our framing of certain issues, to challenge one another, to provide examples of innovation on their own campuses, and even to herald examples from other campuses that had influenced their thinking. In their comments, participants used the language of teaching and learning and evoked an ethos of student-centeredness that clearly demonstrated the connection between remediation and the annual meeting’s theme: “Can Higher Education Recapture the Elusive American Dream?”
Like most conference session presenters, at the end we looked at each other and asked, “Was that any good?” We attempted to process the session’s unexpected twists and turns, and we had to admit that we did not fully address any of the issues we had delineated at the beginning. But then, as we were packing up our belongings to make way for the next group of presenters, several individuals came forward to continue the conversation. Some had been vocal during the session; others were speaking for the first time.

Later, a colleague from a large, urban community college in Texas that is doing incredible work leveraging a range of strategies—from pathways to high-impact practices to course-embedded assessment—approached one of us to comment positively on the decidedly freewheeling conversation and noted her intention to start presenting her own work to ensure that her voice was part of the national conversation.

That’s an aspiration that we applaud and want to help support. And so, after the session, we asked ourselves, “What needs to happen to ensure that the national conversation about higher education reform more fully reflects the knowledge and efforts of our community college educators?” We settled on four ideas:

• **Focus on faculty work.** At every type of institution, faculty are critical to delivering the promise of higher education, and they need to be recognized and rewarded for their work in teaching and learning.

• **Lift up the benefits of exploring different models.** Sometimes inspiration comes from unexpected places, including institutions that are very different from one’s own.

• **Use varied language.** Discussions at some community colleges may focus on soft skills rather than on liberal education, even when the outcomes under consideration are the same.

• **Find points of connection around adaptable approaches.** For example, high-impact educational practices and student learning assessment share commonalities across different institutional contexts, even when they take different forms.

AAC&U wants to showcase more of the good work taking place at community colleges. And community college educators want to be part of the national discussion. Yet many community college faculty and administrators are challenged to find the bandwidth and resources—from travel funding to course releases to more intangible forms of institutional support—necessary to document and present their work as practitioners and scholars. Providing a space for those who attend AAC&U’s annual meeting to engage in open, honest, and challenging conversations—both with other community colleges and with their four-year peers—will help AAC&U better serve all its institutional members and the faculty, administrators, and students that compose them. We want these conversations to continue at next year’s annual meeting and throughout the year ahead as we look to community colleges as critical partners in higher education’s work to define and drive forward our shared pursuit of our students’ American Dreams.

To respond to this article, email liberaled@aacu.org with the authors’ names in the subject line.

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**NOTES**


As the number of cases of targeted harassment of professors continues to grow, the question of how to respond is front and center.

There is nothing new about attacks on college and university faculty for what is deemed unacceptable political expression. Indeed, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) was founded more than one hundred years ago in response to exactly these kinds of attacks. Consider the famous case at Stanford University in 1900, when the widow of the university’s founder demanded that the economist Edward Ross be fired for having, among other things, advocated municipal ownership of utilities and the free silver platform of the Democratic Party. His political associations, she wrote, “bring tears to my eyes . . . he cannot be trusted and he should go.” David Jordan, the university’s president, eventually acquiesced to his benefactor’s pleas.¹

Other cases in the same period—usually involving economists—led to the AAUP’s Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure in 1915, and to John Dewey’s earlier observation that the social sciences were in greater danger than the sciences from challenges to their work. Dewey wrote (prophetically, it seems now):

“The sphere of ideas which has not yet come under recognized scientific control is, moreover, precisely that which is bound up most closely with deep-rooted prejudice and intense emotional reaction. These, in turn, exist because of habits and modes of life to which the people have accustomed themselves. To attack them is to appear to be hostile to institutions with which the worth of life is bound up.”²

In 1971, Angela Davis, then a lecturer in philosophy, was fired from the University of California–Los Angeles for a speech at a rally in which she called police “pigs” and maintained that academic freedom was an “empty concept” if it protected such views as “the genetic inferiority of black people.” The institution terminated Davis’s employment despite testimony from students making clear that her off-campus rhetoric did not spill over into her teaching and research. One of the few trustees who dissented from the decision reminded his colleagues that “in this day and age, when the decibel level of political debate has reached the heights it has, it is unrealistic and disingenuous to demand as a condition of employment that the professor address political rallies in the muted cadences of scholarly exchanges. Professors are products of their times, even as the rest of us.”³

The cases in our own times are not all that different from these and many others investigated by the AAUP over the course of its history. What’s different now is, first, the speed with which social media can disseminate and inflate

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the issues, assembling online mobs in a matter of minutes; second, the vastly increased financial dependency of even public universities on private funders, whose opinions have to be reckoned with; third, the fear of university administrators of any tarring of their “brands” by bad publicity, however questionable its source (another consequence of scarce resources); and fourth, the organized attack on the university by right-wing foundations and think tanks (including the Koch family foundations, the Bradley Foundation, and the Goldwater Institute) in the name of the very principles for which the university stands: free speech, the exchange of ideas, and academic freedom.

And I’ll add a fifth difference: the election of Donald Trump, whose anti-intellectualism has enabled an unprecedented outpouring of venom against so-called elitists, among whom academics are a primary target. Consider Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos warning college students that “the fight against the education establishment extends to you, too. The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and, more ominously, what to think.” Or listen to the vice president of the College Republicans at the University of Tennessee, speaking about a bill, based on a model drafted by the Goldwater Institute, to protect student free speech: “Students are often intimidated by the academic elite in the classroom. Tennessee is a conservative state, [and] we will not allow out of touch professors with no real world experience to intimidate eighteen-year-olds.”

How to respond
As the number of cases of targeted harassment of professors continues to grow, the question of how to respond is front and center. In recent years, there have been both bad responses and good ones.

Examples of bad responses include the removal of the targeted teacher from the classroom for unspecified reasons of campus or individual safety and security; the suspension and then firing of instructors, untenured professors, and contingent faculty without hearings to determine what campus rules they have violated; and the immediate placement on leave of absence of tenured faculty accused of offensive speech. In all these cases, the implication is that the teacher is a danger to her students and to the community as a whole. The double standard for offensive speech has been often noted: while some university administrators go to great lengths to protect the offensive speech of alt-right outside speakers like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos, they act in panic mode when it comes to members of their own faculty, denying the same First Amendment rights they are protecting for outsiders. Even as they go to great lengths to insist on the scholarly credentials (however controversial) of someone like Charles Murray, they fail to investigate the charges made against their own long-tenured faculty members.

Cases involving the politics of Israel/Palestine are particularly egregious: the objections of organized defenders of current Israeli politics to the teachings of Middle Eastern studies scholars suspected of criticizing those politics are allowed to prevail over evaluations of the credentials of the teachers involved. There are cases in which right-wing activists have doctored videos of a professor’s class, quoted a professor’s comments out of context, or attributed to a professor statements that have never been uttered—but these facts cannot come to light when administrators act precipitously, taking the word of Fox News as fact. There are also cases in which police have been called to remove targeted faculty from campus, but not to investigate those who have targeted them with vicious insults and threats to their families and their lives. And in some instances, university leaders have permitted searches of targeted faculty members’ email accounts (as if it were they who had committed a crime), investigations motivated by political critics of their serious and well-respected climate or stem-cell research, for example.

The stated aim of right-wing agitators like David Horowitz is to drive so-called leftist faculty off campus. They succeed in advancing this aim when administrators don’t take the time to follow established procedures of academic due process. And the capitulation to harassers harms more than the harassed; it compromises the integrity of the university itself.

The good examples are those in which administrators defend the speech rights of their faculty and follow established procedures of due process and faculty governance. They involve, first, a resounding defense of the professor’s right of free speech, if the targeted speech is extramural (on
Facebook or Twitter or in an op-ed piece in the local paper) or, if the speech is in the classroom, of the professor’s academic freedom to teach in his or her area of expertise. In the good examples, the university leader refuses to bow to the demands of legislators, politicians, trustees, donors, or outside agitators, instead using the occasion to instruct trustees about the principles of free speech and academic freedom upon which the university is based. In such cases, the president may use his or her bully pulpit to condemn the targeted professor’s ideas or choice of words, but the point is to teach tolerance of, not to silence, speech and ideas with which some may disagree.

If there are serious questions about the competence of the teacher, the institution can follow established procedures to examine those charges. As in legal rulings, a jury of one’s peers can weigh the merits of the charges and how they reflect on the faculty member’s scholarship and teaching. But this is usually beyond what is necessary; the firm insistence by the institution’s leadership on the speech rights of the targeted faculty member is usually enough.

Two cases

The case of tenured associate professor Johnny Williams at Trinity College in Connecticut is an example of the bad and the good. When Williams’s tweets became the object of an extended hate campaign against him (fomented by the conservative news website Campus Reform), he was immediately placed on an involuntary leave of absence by the dean of faculty, who said he was reviewing the circumstances but gave no hint of the timing of the process. After an outpouring of support for Williams, including from the AAUP, which charged that Trinity was in violation of its own stated commitment to recognizing faculty freedom of extramural utterance, the Trinity administration took the stand it should have taken in the first place. In July of last year, Williams was cleared of all charges of wrongdoing and of making racist remarks.8

The president of the college, Joanne Berger-Sweeney, said that Williams’s words and actions—though she disapproved of them—were protected by academic freedom and did not violate Trinity’s policies. She also condemned the hate speech fostered by Campus Reform,
stating that their post “led to distortions and an ensuing harassment that has become troublingly common for people of color and those who speak out on issues of race and racism.” She referred to harassment of the kind Williams experienced as “a threat to freedom of expression and to robust debate aimed at discovering truth and knowledge.” She apparently also swayed her board of trustees, one of whom noted that although not all of the trustees agreed with the decision, they all “support[ed] the tenets of academic freedom that are critical to an institution of learning.”

Welcoming Berger-Sweeney’s decision, faculty at Trinity nonetheless said she should have immediately defended Williams against outside attacks. They pointed to the position taken by Syracuse University Chancellor Kent Syverud when asked to fire Professor Dana Cloud, who had tweeted what were taken to be threats of violence from a rally in New York City that was protesting an anti-Sharia demonstration. Cloud was already on the right-wing Professor Watchlist for her support of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement and was clearly being tracked by the list’s editors. Staunch supporters of free speech such as Ann Coulter demanded her firing. The chancellor offered this exemplary reply: “They insist that the University—and that I—denounce, censor, or dismiss the professor for her speech,” Syverud said, refusing to concede. He went on, “I can’t imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth thriving here without free speech. Our faculty must be able to say and write things—including things that provoke some or make other[s] uncomfortable—up to the very limits of the law.”

As far as we know, Syracuse has not been harmed by Syverud’s outspoken defense of academic freedom and free speech, and the harassment of Dana Cloud seems to have stopped. Leadership of the kind Syverud provided maintains the university as a place where ethical practices and engaged scholarship can thrive. The firm and courageous refusal to allow threats to compromise the integrity of the institution, or to bow to those who would impugn it, is the
only way to protect the university as a safe space for debate and for the pursuit of the knowledge on which free societies depend.

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6. Among the AAUP’s work to address this phenomenon is its statement “Targeted Online Harassment of Faculty,” published January 31, 2017, https://www.aaup.org/news/targeted-online-harassment-faculty#.WnxZLljG1AY.
7. Horowitz has articulated this aim through his website, Frontpage Mag.
“Confronting the ‘Mess’”

Embracing Vulnerability

ALEXANDRA B. REZNİK

As a student and instructor of American literature, I’ve been reading texts that engage with the American Dream for as long I can remember. In high school, I was obsessed with E. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and its narrative of self-creation and destruction. But then I attended an all-women’s undergraduate college, where, in learning how race, class, and gender interact with power, I came to see narratives of the American Dream not as stories of individual successes and failures, but as reflections of patriarchy, access, and white privilege. I’ve come a long way since then: my dissertation research explores how African American women celebrities navigated power systems in the nineteenth century—or, put differently, how they achieved their own American Dreams in the face of systemic oppression.

My research is informed by my students’ reflections on how systems of power, including those of the college classroom, have rendered them invisible and silent. As a hopeful future faculty member, I’m interested in how faculty and administrators can ensure change in higher education so students can empower themselves—a key topic of AAC&U’s recent annual meeting, “Can Higher Education Recapture the Elusive American Dream?” At the meeting, I was pleasantly surprised to attend a keynote panel titled “Identity Matters: Realizing the American Dream.” The panelists affirmed that an awareness of the role identities play in navigating power systems is critical in supporting students’ pursuit of their dreams.

Providing effective leadership and mentorship to students often requires an understanding of power systems and a focus on amplifying marginalized voices. As a queer white woman, in my years as a graduate student, I’ve found that attention to voice is essential, but also messy. Yet as Donna M. Lanclos reminds us, “Confronting the ‘mess’ of people’s everyday practice is a necessary first step towards more effectively connecting people to the resources they want and need.”

The “mess” of my own pedagogical journey reflects the various resources I draw upon to work inclusively with students in the classroom as I try to support them in achieving their dreams.

Facing our privilege, relinquishing our authority

A true, genuine awareness of our identities and how they affect power dynamics across our interactions requires consistent diligence and is never complete. Awareness of all the facets of one’s identity, and what privileges those entail, is necessary to foster an inclusive space where all students can develop their own voices—an integral skill for students striving to achieve their dreams. When I undertake any professional activity—working with students, creating assignments, drafting advertisements for events, or planning meetings—I ask myself how what I’m doing is amplifying others’ voices and countering oppression. In addition, no matter what the context, I enter any space with an openness to learning new perspectives and ideas.

But sometimes I fail to “confront the ‘mess,’” and as a result, I mess up. During the first year of my doctoral studies at Duquesne University, I was selected to mentor a new MA teaching fellow, a black woman who had less teaching experience than I did. I quickly became aware of the power dynamics at play between us. At the start of the semester, I had expected to use many texts that I had previously co-taught with my own mentor, who was white. But when my mentee and I began to review a lesson plan that included a rhetorical analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” she began to cry. I didn’t know what to do. Instead of asking her what she needed...
to Amplify Students’ Voices
to teach this text in a predominantly white classroom, I explained the rhetorical triangle to ameliorate the situation.

In class, when it was her turn to go over the text, she froze. I promptly took over and finished class; I later consulted the director of first-year writing, but I failed to relinquish my authority and enter a messy conversation with my mentee. For the rest of the semester, I struggled to face my own limitations or come to terms with how my privilege allowed me to more easily perform confidence in that classroom of white students and in the university at large. Eventually, my mentee trusted me enough to productively speak back to me, resisting our potentially oppressive power dynamic. I’m infinitely grateful to her for mentoring me, but I also recognize now that it is my responsibility to educate myself about my own racial privilege—a point that I often share with my students.

Challenging our privilege, amplifying marginalized voices

As I have worked to amplify students’ voices and honor their experiences and knowledge, I have learned to adjust how and what I teach based on the context. In fall 2016, I was invited to teach the first-year composition course in Duquesne’s new Africana Learning Community. During my first five years of teaching, I had taught the documentary Wylie Avenue Days to predominantly white classes to counter the stereotype of Pittsburgh’s Hill District as a decimated, dangerous place. Every semester, my students would learn a history never taught to them—that the Hill District is a community that struggles in part because it was cut off from the rest of Pittsburgh’s downtown by the Civic Arena. My approach to teaching Wylie Avenue Days has developed over time as I’ve become a more experienced and confident teacher.

My class in the Africana Learning Community was primarily composed of students of color from the local community. Unlike many of my former students, these students already knew the negative story attached to the Hill District and understood its material effects. In class, as students shared their expertise and experiences, I learned that one student knew Chris Moore, the film’s producer and narrator, from a high school journalism program he had attended. Thanks to him, Moore visited our class, where he answered questions that the class had drafted collaboratively and engaged in discussion with students about the current challenges that Pittsburgh’s black communities face. Ultimately, Moore provided professional development and networking opportunities to the students, inspiring them to get involved with local organizations.
To provide other models for students to reflect on how they navigate oppressive systems of race, class, and gender, I invited other community members of color from diverse backgrounds to speak with the class. The connections students formed by networking with these visitors led them to internship opportunities at start-up companies in Pittsburgh. In reviews of the class, students said they appreciated that I centered their experiences in an inclusive and productive way—something many noted they had never encountered before.

Structuring class in this way required me to relinquish some authority within the traditional instructor-student model. At the same time, it allowed me to foster an inclusive community where everyone participated in, and was accountable for, their own meaningful learning.

Empowering students
One aspect of empowering students involves providing opportunities to practice discussing the dynamics of power and privilege. I planned my spring 2017 course, “Who Run(s) the World?: Power and Performance in World Literature,” with this outcome in mind. While I had designed the course to amplify women’s and girls’ voices, I wanted to make sure the students felt that their own voices were heard and important. I opened the class with a few value statements:

1. Privilege exists, and it resides in systems and individual experiences.
2. Oppression exists, and it resides in systems and individual experiences.
3. Our work in this class will be guided by an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations—race/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion, etc.
4. The personal is political.

I discussed what these statements meant to me and why they are important to shape a classroom that will be genuinely inclusive, and students reflected on what they expected from the course: to grow as writers, but also as young professionals and citizens.

To meet these goals, I created opportunities for students to develop their voices and to hold each other accountable. For example, students wrote blog posts and collaborated with me to revise their essays before publication. Through these posts, students taught their peers and me about social issues and organizations by

K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award
The K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award recognizes graduate students who show exemplary promise as future leaders of higher education, who demonstrate a commitment to developing academic and civic responsibility in themselves and others, and whose work reflects a strong emphasis on teaching and learning. The award honors the work of K. Patricia Cross, professor emerita of higher education at the University of California—Berkeley, and is administered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Following are the recipients of the 2018 award:

Kelsey Boyle, Chemistry, California Institute of Technology
Adrianna I. Celis Luna, Chemistry and Biochemistry, Montana State University
Tony J. Cunningham, Clinical Psychology, University of Notre Dame
Anahid Ebrahimi, Mechanical Engineering, University of Delaware
Darla Ida Himeles, English, Temple University
Rishi R. Masalia, Plant Biology, University of Georgia
Alexandra B. Reznik, English, Duquesne University

Nominations for the 2019 award are due Monday, October 1, 2018. (For more information, see www.aacu.org/about/crossaward.) The recipients will be introduced at the 2019 annual meeting, where they will deliver a presentation titled “Faculty of the Future: Voices of the Next Generation.”
connecting course texts and their own experiences. The posts, as well as student-led class discussions, amplified the presence of civic responsibility in students’ lives and gave them a means to challenge systems of privilege.

By the end of the course, students embraced examining their privilege and considering ways to challenge systems of oppression in writing and discussion. I felt a certain comfort in interacting with this diverse group of students (consisting predominantly of women of color and white women but including a few men) who let down their guard to discuss privilege and oppression. That experience prepared me to work with students who weren’t initially so open, a dynamic that arose in the next course I taught.

**Cycles of discomfort, courage, and transformation**

In fall 2017, I discovered again that I needed to revisit what, how, and why I was teaching with a different set of identity positions in mind. Following my invigorating world literature course, I decided to focus my first-year writing course solely on Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade*. While many students enrolled in the course were open to encountering new ideas and were excited to read work by black women scholars, some were more skeptical. I will always appreciate one uncomfortable interaction with a student who, during a meeting to discuss a paper he was writing for the course, said that he didn’t understand what *Lemonade* had to do with him as a white guy from New Jersey. After taking a breath, I explained that *Lemonade* amplifies a black woman’s experience, and that one way white people can counter racism is to listen to that experience without judgment and learn from it what we can. The student and I then engaged in a conversation where we were both open to learning within our discomfort. I have found that this messy work doesn’t scare students away; in fact, if students feel like they are genuinely listened to, they are willing to come back for more.

As educators and administrators, if we are going to support students’ pursuit of their dreams, we need to release our ideas about wielding complete authority and our positions as content experts. This process will look different for each of us depending on our individual identities; for some, like me, it will require grappling with our own privilege. If we are going to make liberal education relevant to students in the twenty-first century, we need to honor the fact that students arrive at our colleges, universities, and classrooms with valid experiences that have shaped who they are and the skills they bring to the table. Our role as educators is to help students realize the potential that they already have. I believe that the only way to genuinely support students is to be open to one’s own mistakes and failures, and to model for our students how to use those mistakes as powerful opportunities for development. Vulnerable moments are scary and painful—and sometimes they involve being wrong. But in those moments, the most meaningful relationships and personal transformations happen.

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**NOTE**


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