Signature Work for All Students
AAC’s Century of Change and Commitment
Creating the Connected Institution
Leadership Practices for Interfaith Excellence
Student Resistance to Problematic Texts
The Liberal Arts and Organizational Design
The New Era of “Hire” Education
Signature Work instantiates the idea that the knowledge and skills developed through a broad and multidimensional liberal education come to fullest fruition when they are put to active use—intentionally, ethically, and reflectively.

Carol Geary Schneider
From 1818 R Street NW

President’s Message

From the Editor

News and Information

Featured Topic

The LEAP Challenge: Transforming for Students, Essential for Liberal Education
By Carol Geary Schneider

The LEAP Challenge: Education for a World of Unscripted Problems

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Centennial Series

“Making Better Colleges”: AAC’s Century of Change and Commitment
By Linda Eisenmann

Perspectives

Creating the Connected Institution: Toward Realizing Benjamin Franklin and Ernest Boyer’s Revolutionary Vision for American Higher Education
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“I’m Not Going to Be Reading This Anymore”: Student Resistance to Problematic Texts
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The Liberal Arts and Organizational Design: Cultivating for Change
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My View

The New Era of “Hire” Education
By Miguel Martinez-Saenz and Steven Schoonover Jr.
An Announcement to the AAC&U Membership

AAC&U is an extraordinary community. Our members are drawn together by a shared commitment to the enduring value of liberal education and by a restless quest to adapt the practices of liberal education to the challenges of an interconnected world and for the benefit of contemporary college students, in all their diversity. The AAC&U staff also are incredible colleagues, and our community is enriched by their dedication.

I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from the AAC&U community since I first came to the association, initially as a vice president, and, since 1998, as president. But I am also well aware that every leader must choose the right time for his or her transition. In this spirit, I have been thinking hard, in close consultation with the board, about the right time to conclude my service as leader for this community.

At the board’s request, I agreed to shepherd AAC&U through its Centennial Year in 2015. I also agreed to work with the board, staff, and community to frame and help launch AAC&U’s “second century.” The result of this planning is the LEAP Challenge, the next phase of AAC&U’s work on Liberal Education and America’s Promise. The LEAP Challenge represents our shared view of the best way to make liberal education both empowering for every student and renewing for our society at large. The LEAP Challenge invites students to articulate and embrace their own driving questions, and it asks higher education to ensure that students develop the knowledge, skills, experiences, and ethical responsibility to do sustained, significant “signature work”—with faculty and other mentors—related to those questions.

I believe deeply in this kind of purpose-driven direction for integrative liberal learning. I believe it is a crucial innovation to help anchor student learning as we move into a digital age.

But, in the coming years, I will champion this important direction for liberal education and inclusive excellence as the past president of AAC&U.

June 30, 2016, will mark the end of my term as president. I know that, with an extraordinary board and staff fully engaged in work that serves our members and our students, AAC&U is well poised for its next era of leadership and service within higher education.

In the meantime, our Centennial Year is still in full gear. I hope you will plan to take part in at least one of the special Centennial events that are still to come in this calendar year. Some address the LEAP Challenge as students themselves embrace it; others explore what we are learning about bringing “quality and equity together” as shared priorities for both practice and policy in US higher education.

And, I hope I will see many of you in January 2016 at what will be my final AAC&U Annual Meeting as president.

With sincere thanks for your good work and constant support—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER
A Response from the AAC&U Board of Directors

Dr. Carol Geary Schneider’s decision to step down as AAC&U’s president at the end of June 2016 offers the Board of Directors an occasion to commemorate her remarkable achievements. For the last fifteen years as president of AAC&U, and in the ten years prior to that as a vice president, Carol has compiled a significant record of advancing liberal education, its quality, and its inclusiveness.

The Board congratulates Carol. To a person, we feel privileged to have worked with her on these critically important matters, especially in this Centennial Year. The Board takes this opportunity to express its gratitude for all that Carol has accomplished, and we pledge our continued commitment to working with her in the months ahead to advance several key initiatives.

We also will prepare the association for the exciting work ahead. It is a testament to Carol’s personal leadership that she began working with the Board on the timing of the transition well in advance of her announcement. She also has assembled a staff of exceptionally talented and dedicated colleagues who will work closely with the Board in the coming months. We have formally launched the search for her successor and will continue to communicate regularly with the association about the process and the timing.

For the moment, though, we call upon the membership to pause and reflect upon this historic moment for AAC&U. Carol Geary Schneider’s presidency has been a remarkable one. As members of the Board, we have been fortunate—and, more importantly, higher education in this country has been fortunate—to have benefited from her creative and inspired leadership.
At the annual meeting in January, which marked the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the association and the tenth anniversary of the launch of its ongoing Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, AAC&U challenged higher education to make “Signature Work” a goal for all students and the expected standard of quality learning in college. Focused on a question, issue, or problem chosen by the student because of its importance to him or her as well as to the broader society, Signature Work involves the sustained integration and application of learning over the course of at least one semester.

The Featured Topic section reiterates that challenge, explaining in some depth what is meant by Signature Work, what it takes to prepare students to bring their liberal learning to this highest level of achievement, why such preparation is essential for all of today's students, and what all this actually looks like in practice. “The LEAP Challenge: Education for a World of Unscripted Problems,” a folio distributed at the annual meeting and reprinted here, introduces this new phase of the LEAP initiative and situates its key concepts within that stream of ongoing work. This is preceded by a more in-depth presentation of the LEAP Challenge by Carol Geary Schneider and followed by a survey of the various forms its centerpiece, Signature Work, is already taking on member campuses.

In addition to focusing on the LEAP Challenge, with which AAC&U has inaugurated its second century of work in behalf of liberal education and inclusive excellence, this issue also carries the first in a four-part “Centennial Series” of articles designed to explore various aspects of AAC&U’s first century of work. Here, Linda Eisenmann considers how the founding ideals of inclusiveness and interhelpfulness have guided the association throughout its long history. Future articles in the series will examine the involvement of faculty in the work of the association, key changes in curricular design over the past century, and the long and especially fruitful partnership between AAC&U and the Ford Foundation on issues related to diversity in undergraduate education.—DAVID TRITELLI
Centennial Video
AAC&U has released a new video about the kind of engaged, public-spirited liberal education that can transform students’ lives and address the “big questions.” Titled “Liberal Education: America’s Promise,” the video presents the perspectives of students, educators, and business leaders. The video also features the following AAC&U member institutions: California State University—Fullerton, California State University—Northridge, The College of Wooster, LaGuardia Community College, Michigan State University, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute. To watch the video online, go to www.aacu.org/centennial/video.

New Report Presents Findings from Surveys of Students and Employers
AAC&U has published a new report that summarizes the findings of two national surveys commissioned by AAC&U and conducted by Hart Research Associates—one of employers, and the other of college students. Consistent with the findings of five earlier surveys commissioned by AAC&U as part of its ongoing LEAP initiative, the new employer survey found that employers overwhelmingly endorse broad learning and cross-cutting skills as the best preparation for long-term career success. However, employers give weak grades to students on the outcomes they identify as most important for career success. The full report, titled Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success, is available for free download from www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research.

Centennial Forums on Global Flourishing and the Equity Imperative
As part of a series of special events marking the association’s hundredth anniversary, AAC&U is sponsoring four forums focused on global flourishing and the equity imperative. The first of these was held in January at the Centennial Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. The second, held in Los Angeles on April 15, brought together educational, policy, civic, and business leaders to examine the learning all college students need to thrive in a knowledge economy and participate actively and responsibly in a diverse and global society. Participants examined economic trends—including both national trends and trends particular to the state of California—and considered the implications for educational policy and practice. The third forum will be held in Chicago on May 29, and the fourth will be held in New York City in November. For more information, go to www.aacu.org/centennial/events.

Upcoming Meetings
• June 2–6, 2015
Institute on General Education and Assessment
University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma

• June 7–11, 2015
Wye Deans’ Seminar
Aspen Institute–Wye River Campus, Queenstown, Maryland

• June 9–13, 2015
Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success
University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, Wisconsin

• July 1–30, 2015
PKAL Summer Leadership Institutes for STEM Faculty
Crestone, Colorado, and Adamstown, Maryland

• July 14–18, 2015
Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments
University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware

• July 18–24, 2015
2015 Wye Faculty Seminar
Aspen Institute–Wye River Campus, Queenstown, Maryland

• October 8–10, 2015
Global Learning in College
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

AAC&U Membership 2015
1,352 members

Masters 31%
Bacc 24%
Doc 17%
Assoc 12%
RACC 12%
Other* 16%

*Specialized schools, state systems and agencies, international affiliates, and organizational affiliates
CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

The LEAP Challenge

Transforming for Students, Essential for Liberal Education

In January 2015, at its Centennial annual meeting, AAC&U announced the LEAP Challenge, releasing to all participants the LEAP Challenge folio reproduced in this issue of Liberal Education. The key concept at the center of the LEAP Challenge is that all college students need to prepare to contribute in a world marked by open or unscripted problems—problems where the right answer is far from known and where solutions are necessarily created under conditions of uncertainty. These are the kinds of problems we face in the economy, which today is fueled by innovation and ongoing, turbulent change. These are also, beyond doubt, the kinds of problems we face both in the global community and in our own diverse and deeply divided democracy. Some leaders speak of “wicked problems,” others of “grand challenges.” Whichever term you use, the fact is that our graduates are entering a world of extraordinary complexity and uncertainty. The solutions they create will hold lasting consequence for our shared future.

The best way to prepare students to create solutions in a complex world, the LEAP Challenge affirms, is to actively involve students in working on problem-centered inquiry from the time they enter college (and, optimally, before) until they successfully complete their degrees—two-year and four-year degrees alike. The “challenge,” then, is to prepare every college student—yes, every one of them—to engage complex problems and questions and to ensure that they develop facility in evidence-based inquiry, analysis, and decision making.

The focal point of the LEAP Challenge is each student’s completion of a significant project—extending across an entire semester or more—that represents the student’s own best work on a question or problem that matters to the student and to society. Because this is intended to be the student’s most significant accomplishment in college, we have termed this assignment “Signature Work.” For students in two-year institutions, Signature Work will be completed in the second year of college. For students who complete a bachelor’s degree, the sophomore experience will be preparatory, and students will complete more advanced Signature Work in the final phase of college. (See the sample guided pathway depicted on page 8.)

You may already be thinking, “Just one project? That’s hardly enough!” We agree. Students’ Signature Work should build from many prior efforts, across the entirety of the college experience. Signature Work should reflect and demonstrate cumulative and integrative learning across general and specialized studies. It is not intended as a one-off or an “add-on,” but rather as a centering expectation that helps students recognize and engage the larger purposes of their college study.

Signature Work can take many different forms and directions. It may explore an enduring issue, like virtue or altruism or the concept of a just society. It may explore a contemporary issue, like health disparities or housing policy in a specific community or state. It may be part of an ongoing research laboratory, focusing on issues like immune-cell proliferation. But whatever the subject and inquiry strategy, the Signature Work project should require students to integrate and apply their college learning—minimally, across more than one discipline, and frequently, between formal and informal or experiential learning.

CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER is president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.
Developed in the context of AAC&U’s ongoing Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, the LEAP Challenge also is AAC&U’s second-century call for higher education to help all students reap the most significant benefits of a liberal and liberating education. In the spirit of AAC&U’s recently expanded mission, it challenges higher education to make the most powerful forms of college learning inclusive, rather than exclusive.

The LEAP Challenge encompasses learners in all fields of study. It includes professional and career fields along with the full array of liberal arts and sciences. By positioning students as investigators and solution-generators, the LEAP Challenge draws together, quite deliberately, both the analytical inquiry strengths that have long characterized the liberal arts and sciences and the applied learning and professional responsibility strengths that have long characterized professional and career fields. In addition, the LEAP Challenge adds to liberal arts and career fields a strong focus on ethical and civic questions—questions about the larger and most responsible uses of knowledge. By design, it moves such questions into the center of the required college curriculum.

To graduate, each student should complete Signature Work

The LEAP Challenge calls on colleges, universities, and community colleges to help each student identify a problem or question that matters, both to the student and to society, and complete a significant project related to that problem or question. Students’ completion of such a project ought to become a degree qualification requirement, just as central to college graduation as the completion of the right number of courses in general education and major programs.

And, in a closely related corollary, the LEAP Challenge also calls on higher education to proactively prepare students—through guided practice beginning in the initial year of college—to undertake and complete such extended investigative and creative projects. This, in turn, will entail a redesign of students’ educational pathways, away from the “breadth first, depth later” design established nearly a century ago and toward a new focus on integrative learning, across general and specialized studies.

In the twentieth century, thanks to the division of labor among disciplines, students’ most advanced work tended to be located within the

### SAMPLE GUIDED PATHWAY WITH SIGNATURE WORK

Preparing students to do Signature Work will require thoughtful redesign of curricular pathways. This example of a general education pathway is rich in problem-based learning. It can be integrated with any well-designed major. Students taking this pathway would develop core intellectual skills and knowledge through exploration of big questions, and they would be required to apply their learning in their own Signature Work.

**E-portfolios show student’s problem-based learning and proficiencies over time**

**First-Year Inquiry and College Writing**

**Creative & Artistic Inquiry**

**Cross-Cultural and Global Studies**

**Quantitative Reasoning**

**Socioeconomic Analysis**

**Second-Year Inquiry Seminar**

**Science Explorations**

**Thematic Course Clusters**

Three or more courses across multiple disciplines, including the major field. A student examines questions important to him/her and to society.

- **Thematic Course 1**
- **Thematic Course 2**
- **Thematic Course 3**

**Signature Work**

A student’s best work, which can take many forms (e.g., capstone, internship, field work, research, community-based research)

*For students in two-year degree programs, this work is Signature Work. For students in four-year degree programs, it is preparation for Signature Work. Transfer students may take the second-year inquiry seminar at the original institution or following transfer.*
discourse of disparate disciplines—engaged with scholarly debate, but not necessarily concerned with how society makes use of knowledge. Today, in a knowledge-driven global community, we need to ensure that students can connect their own specializations to ongoing work in related fields as well as to the various realms of concerted action—public action, economic action, civic action. Complex problems, after all, rarely come in neatly divided packages labeled “literature,” “history,” or “chemistry.” Instead, they invite perspectives of many different kinds—historical, ethical, systemic, technical, and practical.

Whereas scholars from an earlier era pulled problems apart into disciplinary configurations in order to develop greater methodological sophistication, a focus on problem-centered inquiry requires us to help students put knowledge together and examine questions from multiple points of view, including perspectives related to action, implementation, and evaluation of the intended results. Disciplines are still foundational, of course. They still help students develop analytical focus and methodological rigor. But in the twenty-first century, graduates need to be able to think and work across disciplinary boundaries, both in their own approaches to complex questions and in their ability to engage colleagues whose views and analytical perspectives are different from their own.

Problem-centered inquiry further requires learners to think through the implications and consequences of their choices and decisions. What are the costs? What are the benefits? Who is most directly affected, for better or worse, by a set of choices? Can negative consequences be ameliorated? The visible evidence of how well higher education is doing in educating ethical problem-solvers will be each student’s Signature Work: tangible evidence about the graduate’s readiness to tackle complex questions in the world beyond college.

**Signature Work should include reflective learning**

As noted, Signature Work can take many different forms, depending on the individual student’s goals, interests, and choice of concentration. Signature Work might be a major research project done independently or collaboratively. It might be a portfolio showing a body of work related to the student’s inquiry and findings. It might be an internship or practicum in which the student produces significant work and provides additional reflection on the learning gained from the experience of working in a field-based setting. It might be a creative project—the writing of a play or the making of a documentary. For working students (and most students do, in fact, work) the project can become a way to connect their studies with their job responsibilities.

In addition, Signature Work should also include a societal reflection component. For example, a student working on issues related to literacy, health care, or nutrition would explore not just the project at hand, but the larger systemic and policy context in which such issues are embedded. Or, a student completing a business strategy plan for an organization would explore not just products and services, but ways that a strategy can serve community needs and interests. Students working on basic research can and should spend time on the processes by which breakthrough knowledge is translated into new products and services. They should be invited to consider the ethical and equity dilemmas that are inherent in all these processes, along with their own roles and responsibilities in making choices that keep equity and ethics centrally in view.

Whatever the form and whatever the subject matter, students’ Signature Work should always include significant writing and significant reflection on their own journeys of exploration and discovery. It should always be done with faculty mentors so that students can benefit directly from faculty members’ wealth of experience in scholarly inquiry and exploration.

**From academically adrift to creatively adroit**

Of course, preparing students to grapple productively with complex issues and choices is,
The divides in student engagement and achievement are deeper within any given institution than are the divides in deep learning across different types of institutions.

Aggregating credits is not the point of college

A key idea behind the LEAP Challenge is that college study has to be more than the completion of discrete courses. If our goal is to create self-directed lifelong learners, then at some point each student has to take the lead—with mentors—in shaping his or her own self-initiated course of inquiry. And, if we seek to educate students who can work constructively with others, we should ensure that at least some aspects of students’ inquiry and creative studies will be done collaboratively, with peers and/or community partners as well as with faculty mentors.

By labeling this “Signature Work,” we are saying to the student: “This should be your most substantial college accomplishment. It’s not just one more paper, and it’s not something you can finish in a couple of days or a week. This is your opportunity to think through a complex set of issues, to do research, to consult with others, and then to take responsibility for the quality and integrity of the final accomplishment.”

In addition, we are saying to the academy, and especially to policy leaders who currently are far more focused on efficiency and job placement than on the quality of student learning, that the old ways of counting progress toward the degree mask fundamental questions about what students can do with their learning. Especially as we move into an era in which students are increasingly “constructing” the degree with courses taken everywhere and anywhere, we need to ensure that students can successfully integrate their learning and apply it to meaningful problems of the students’ own devising.

Today, policy leaders are simply not asking whether students’ experience of college was designed to ensure that they leave ready to apply their learning to new contexts and open-ended problems. Nor are they asking why it is that some students at virtually every college, university, and community college participate in the most enriching and empowering forms of college learning, while the majority do not. But this, in my view, is exactly where college accountability ought to go.

Graduation rates are a shallow indicator. What we really need are quality learning indicators. The LEAP Challenge points toward a new generation of indicators of excellence.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been reporting for some time that, over the course of a four-, five-, or six-year college journey, the average college student participates in fewer than two of the “high-impact practices” NSSE tracks, which include service learning, research, capstone projects, and study abroad. AAC&U’s own studies have found that, on average, students engage in between 1 and 2 (1.3) high-impact practices. Depressingly, though unsurprisingly, first-generation students participate in these high-impact practices less frequently than students from college-educated families.

AAC&U is calling on higher education and on policy leaders to engage proactively with that quality learning shortfall and to do so in ways that make college empowering for all students,
especially first-generation and underserved students. And, as policy leaders focus on expedited ways to help students quickly collect the course credits they need, AAC&U is affirming that college learning needs to be characterized by something more than the aggregation of course credits.

The right policy choice, we contend, is a new focus on completion with demonstrated achievement. That “demonstrated achievement” ought to be each student’s accomplishment of a substantial piece of Signature Work. Eventually, the VALUE rubrics can be used to assess what such work reveals about the level and quality of students’ achievement of essential learning outcomes or proficiencies. But the first step in a new approach to accountability is to ensure that all students are doing the kind of work that builds their capacities to deal with complexity.

47 percent of college students already do culminating work. Why not 100 percent?

AAC&U does not build its major initiatives de novo. Rather, we track educational reform movements in the making and, where the evidence suggests that these movements will improve the intentionality and quality of liberal learning, we do what we can to accelerate the pace of change. The LEAP Challenge is intended to highlight, accelerate, and significantly strengthen reform agendas that faculty have already put in motion across US higher education.

The LEAP Challenge builds specifically on the documented power of a family of engaged learning practices that now are labeled “high impact” because of their well-documented correlations with higher levels of persistence and learning (see sidebar). The LEAP Challenge also builds on the power of faculty members’ own judgment about forms of learning that engage and empower today’s highly diverse, and diversely prepared, college students.

While the evidence concerning high-impact practices now invites educators to describe them as a kind of set, each of the practices itself represents a discrete reform movement developed and advanced over decades by dedicated faculty members and staff across a wide swathe of different institutional contexts. Through our projects and our many conferences and summer institutes, AAC&U observed these practices as they developed and spread widely across the academy.

Starting as early as 2002, we became proactive in seeking out evidence about the educational results of these practices for students. In partnership with George Kuh and NSSE, we helped develop and promulgate evidence showing that these practices improve learning and persistence. It has been highly confirming to see the expansion of student participation in high-impact practices become a stated goal for many colleges, universities, community colleges, and even state systems.

The LEAP Challenge builds on and indeed incorporates the full spectrum of high-impact practices. But it also singles out from the family of empirically high-value practices the concept of capstone or culminating work.

The concept of engaging students systematically in experiences that help them synthesize and apply their learning to significant problems is itself a high-impact reform still in the making, one that AAC&U has worked to promote and accelerate since 1990. At that time, while working in partnership with a dozen scholarly fields ranging from history and economics to biology and women’s studies, AAC&U called on higher education leaders and faculty to help all college students integrate and apply learning from their major fields and from their other studies as well.

Since 1990, the notion that students ought to do some kind of culminating work has gained

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<th>HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES</th>
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<td>The teaching and learning practices listed below have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students, especially those from groups that historically have been underserved by higher education. These practices take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts.</td>
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<td><strong>• First-Year Experiences</strong></td>
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<td><strong>• Common Intellectual Experiences</strong></td>
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<td><strong>• Learning Communities</strong></td>
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<td><strong>• Writing-Intensive Courses</strong></td>
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<td><strong>• Collaborative Assignments and Projects</strong></td>
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<td><strong>• Internships</strong></td>
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<td><strong>• Capstone Courses and Projects</strong></td>
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More information about high-impact practices is available online at www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices.
significant ground. NSSE provides us with a very rough benchmark concerning progress in making culminating work expected at the BA and BS levels. According to NSSE, 47 percent of graduating seniors report that they have “completed a culminating senior experience,” with the spread extending from 41 percent at research universities to 75 percent in baccalaureate colleges. To my knowledge, there is no comparable data set for the associate’s degree. However, we can see from AAC&U’s ongoing national initiatives with community colleges that the concept of a capstone course or experience is gaining ground at the two-year level as well.

The NSSE finding that almost half of graduating seniors do culminating work shows us that the LEAP Challenge is intersecting with movement toward more intentionally integrative designs for college learning. But it also shows us that we will have to double the number of those actually completing “signature” or culminating work if we really want to influence the quality and focus of students’ college learning.

Employers strongly endorse the work-related value of students’ Signature Work

AAC&U is recommending the LEAP Challenge because we believe student engagement in inquiry- and problem-centered learning is good educational practice. That said, with the entire society intensely focused on creating stronger connections between college and the economy, it is good news that employers think Signature Work would represent a much-needed improvement in the quality of college learning and in students’ preparation for success in the workplace.

As part of the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has commissioned five separate national surveys exploring employers’ views on the learning that would help graduates thrive in the economy. The latest of these surveys, released in January 2015, explored in quite a bit of detail what kinds of applied-learning experiences would give students a hiring advantage. Following are the top five learning experiences that employers believe help students in the job selection process (followed by the percentage of employers who endorsed these specific practices as helpful to graduates):10

- Internship/apprenticeship with company/organization (94%)
- Senior thesis/project demonstrating knowledge, research, problem-solving, communication skills (87%)
- Research project done collaboratively with peers (80%)
- Service-learning project with community organization (69%)
- Field-based project in diverse community with people from different background/culture (66%)

So, in sum, employers will be highly supportive of the hands-on turn that the LEAP Challenge is bringing to college learning and liberal education. Indeed, seven out of ten employers think that applied-learning experiences should be required for all students. This is, of course, exactly what the LEAP Challenge is recommending.

Liberal education will flourish by embracing the future, and by solving its own inherent problems

In what follows, I offer a few thoughts on the significance of the LEAP Challenge as it relates to the longer trajectory of high-quality liberal learning and, especially, AAC&U’s determined efforts to make the most empowering forms of learning a resource for all students.

The LEAP Challenge and the digital revolution. In releasing the LEAP Challenge, we assume that the digital revolution will proceed apace and that students will construct their own combinations of face-to-face, digitally supported and blended forms of learning—optimally, with strong social support and guidance. The question is not whether this will happen; the digital revolution has begun, and it will undoubtedly gain momentum as it moves forward. Rather, the question is how we can help students ensure that the different parts of their learning add up to genuine empowerment for them. Students are entering a world of unscripted problems. How can we ensure that their particular blends of study prepare them to navigate an era of far-reaching change and, even more important, to help solve problems that are important to them and to our society?

The LEAP Challenge is AAC&U’s response to that question. It seeks to make liberal education work better for today’s students—those learning online primarily and those learning in blended settings. It seeks to honor the individual faculty-member’s role as a scholar-researcher by creating opportunities for faculty to teach students the
arts of inquiry and analysis, and it seeks to work with faculty in helping students apply those arts to open-ended questions and problems. In online settings, students can use digital tools and virtual communities to do their projects. But their learning will be deeper and more significant than the simple completion of the inscribed requirements of particular digital courses and course assignments.

The LEAP Challenge and the problem of fostering general education. General education is an American signature, reflecting the distinctive view that college study should not be focused primarily or exclusively on a single academic or career field but, rather, should engage students in learning across the full range of the humanities, social sciences, arts, sciences, and mathematics. Why do we insist on this broad learning? The traditional argument, which one can trace back to the eighteenth century, is that citizens in a self-governing democracy need broadly educated leaders who, because of their broad learning, can make wise choices for the republic. More recently, educators have affirmed that all college graduates need intentional preparation for civic participation. They have also affirmed that broad learning helps students situate their potential career interests in a larger context. Employers themselves endorse the importance of broad learning for career success. Four separate surveys conducted by Hart Research Associates have shown persuasively that employers prefer breadth plus depth as career preparation over an exclusive focus on a single field of study.

But with all that said, general education has become, for many students, a perplexing wasteland of disconnected courses taken across the liberal arts and sciences. Typically, almost all students are advised to get these requirements “out of the way” as soon as possible. Neither the advisors giving such advice nor the students receiving it hold any expectation that students will actually use their broad learning for any purpose other than to fulfill institutional requirements for the degree. In our current era of efficiency-mindedness and chronic cost-cutting, requirements without apparent purpose are poised to sound a death knell for multidisciplinary college education—that is, for liberal education.

The LEAP Challenge is intended to bring a renewed sense of purpose and direction to students’ general studies. Since Signature Work draws on multiple disciplines, not just the major, it instantiates the expectation that students should use their general education learning to

K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Awards

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 awards honor the work of K. Patricia Cross, professor emerita of higher education at the University of California–Berkeley, and are administered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Following are the recipients of the 2015 awards:

Any Adair, English Language and Literature, Yale University
Rebecca Christensen, Higher Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Neil Conner, Geography, University of Tennessee
Victoria Hortensia Febrer, Visual Arts, Stony Brook University
Carolyn Fisher, Biochemistry, Cornell University
Jacob Grohs, Educational Psychology, Virginia Tech
Rebekah Le, Developmental Biology, University of California–Irvine
Hannah Miller, Teacher Education, Michigan State University
Naghme Naseri Morlock, Sociology, University of Colorado Boulder
Erin Marie Rentschler, English, Duquesne University

Nominations for the 2016 awards are due October 1, 2015. (For more information, see www.aacu.org/about/crossaward.) The recipients will be introduced at the 2016 annual meeting, where they will deliver a presentation on “Faculty of the Future: Voices of the Next Generation.”
explore a significant problem from more than one analytic perspective. The LEAP Challenge also invites students to take upper-level courses in order to meet general education requirements and to tie those courses directly to their Signature Work. In other words, the LEAP Challenge invites educators to connect the stated rationale for general education—broad learning is absolutely necessary for both civic participation and career success—to the actual practice of general education. And, it will help students themselves discover, at long last, a meaningful answer to the perennial question, “Why do I have to take these courses?”

**The LEAP Challenge and students’ career and vocational interests.** Preparing for AAC&U’s Centennial, I read back through early volumes of *The Bulletin and Liberal Education*, the journal in which the organization faithfully recorded speeches from early annual meetings as well as articles probing the state of college learning.14 If a single theme is constant, it is the complaint that students are too vocational, too intent on reducing college studies to preparation for their careers. Yet, now that higher education is deliberately drawing learners from all parts of the income scale, with special emphasis on low-income students, it stands to reason that students’ career orientation has only intensified.

The LEAP initiative in general and the LEAP Challenge in particular invite educators to reframe the relationship between college learning and careers. For too long, we have vainly sought to entice students to worry about higher questions, while dismissing their entirely understandable view that college should be a portal to expanded opportunity in the economy and in the larger society. This is really a kind of class bigotry, a fundamental indifference to the very practical concerns that bring low-income learners to college in the first place.

The LEAP Challenge takes an entirely different tack. It is quite likely that many, perhaps the vast majority of students, will do Signature Work related to their career interests. Currently, the 47 percent of seniors who do culminating work most likely do so because their departments require senior projects. And, more often than not, students have chosen majors that, in their own minds at least, relate to their career interests and trajectories. The LEAP Challenge capitalizes by design on students’ desire to prepare for career opportunity and success. As advisors can point out, employers prefer graduates who have completed significant projects in college.15

But the LEAP Challenge also is designed to enlarge students’ perspectives on how to use knowledge creatively, ethically, and responsibly. If well designed, Signature Work projects will be inquiry driven, cross disciplinary, integrative, and ethically reflective. Instead of leaving graduates essentially on their own in connecting learning with work, Signature Work can model a process that provides faculty-mentored guidance on how to construct a project worth doing and faculty-guided reflection on what students, individually and together, have discovered through their attempts to integrate knowing and doing, learning and solution generation. Signature Work will focus on what it means to do work worth the effort.

In addition, Signature Work instantiates the idea that the knowledge and skills developed through a broad and multidimensional liberal education come to fullest fruition when they are put to active use—intentionally, ethically, and reflectively. Instead of pitting civic learning and career learning against one another, as educators so often do, Signature Work creates a way to bring civic questions and applied or practical questions together. In sum, Signature Work brings a much-needed integrative center to the heart of liberal education and students' liberal learning. It will help us fulfill the “promise” of a life-enhancing liberal education.

**Carpe diem**

The long-term point of the LEAP Challenge is inherent in the title we have chosen for this long-term change effort. To prepare our students for a challenging world, we must chart a new course for college learning. While there remains much to learn as we follow this course, we do need to keep in mind a single, historically grounded truth: liberal education has remained our premier educational tradition because its practices constantly adapt to a changing world. The goals endure across time and place—fostering broad learning, cultivating the powers of
the mind, developing commitments to civic and ethical responsibility—but the practices necessarily change.

Breadth and depth became the next great thing for the practice of liberal education in 1909, when Harvard College instituted a new regime of distribution and concentration for undergraduate study. Over the next few decades, most of higher education followed suit. But that was a century ago. Today, our society needs braided learning that teaches students how to bring breadth, depth, inquiry, and application to bear on specific complex questions. This is the next frontier for liberal education in our time. We invite—and challenge—our members to make this much-needed LEAP.

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

NOTES
1. Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) is AAC&U’s ongoing signature initiative. Launched in 2005, it provides a comprehensive and inclusive framework for college learning and reform that includes “essential learning outcomes,” engaged or “high-impact” learning practices intended to help students practice and achieve the essential learning outcomes, and VALUE rubrics for assessing students’ progress toward achievement of the outcomes. LEAP encompasses all areas of college study, including professional and career fields. For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap.
2. In 2012, the association’s board of directors approved a new mission statement, making “inclusive excellence” a mission-level priority: “The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.”
6. Developed by teams of faculty and other educational professionals as part of AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project, the VALUE rubrics are sixteen templates, each of which helps evaluators assess the level of competence represented in a collection of exemplary student work (a paper, a performance, a community service project, etc.) and also can be adapted to assess the work of individual students. Each rubric addresses five to six key criteria for a particular competency (e.g., quantitative literacy), and the evaluator determines which level of competence the student’s piece of work demonstrates: a benchmark level, one of two milestone levels, or the highest capstone level. For more information or to download the rubrics, visit www.aacu.org/value/rubrics.
11. Ibid., 6.
14. The association’s quarterly journal, The Bulletin (launched in 1915), was retitled Liberal Education in 1959.
Editor’s Note: This article was adapted from The LEAP Challenge: Education for a World of Unscripted Problems, a folio distributed at the opening plenary session of the 2015 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities at which the LEAP Challenge was formally launched.

To order free printed copies of the original brochure or to download a PDF version, please visit www.aacu.org/leap/challenge.

Liberal education: Preparing students for complexity and change

Liberal education prepares students to understand and manage complexity, diversity, and change. Students who experience an engaged liberal education gain broad knowledge (e.g., of science, culture, and society) and in-depth knowledge in a specific area of interest. They develop high-level transferable skills, including communication, evidence-based reasoning, and problem solving, as well as proficiencies particular to their fields.

Perhaps most importantly, liberally educated students learn how to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. They develop a sense of social responsibility so they can contribute with integrity to their workplaces and to their communities.

Over the years, the goals of liberal education have endured even as the courses and requirements that define such an education have changed. As in past periods of societal change, new forms of liberal education are emerging today—approaches that recognize the value of focusing more explicitly on specific twenty-first-century learning outcomes and integrating high-impact educational practices, while also requiring in-depth study.

As it marks its Centennial, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) introduces the LEAP Challenge.

The LEAP Challenge:
Signature Work for all students

The LEAP Challenge invites colleges and universities to make Signature Work a goal for all students and the expected standard of quality learning in college.

In Signature Work, a student uses his or her cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem he or she defines. In a project conducted throughout at least one semester, the student takes the lead and produces work that expresses insights and learning gained from the inquiry and demonstrates the skills and knowledge he or she has acquired. Faculty and other mentors provide support and guidance.

Signature Work might be pursued in a capstone course, through research conducted across thematically linked courses, in field-based activity, or through an internship. It might include practicums, community service, or other forms of experiential learning; it always should include substantial writing, multiple kinds of reflection on learning, and visible results. Many students may choose to use e-portfolios to display their Signature Work products and learning outcomes.

Signature Work’s essential role

A twenty-first-century education must prepare students to deal successfully with unscripted problems. Today’s graduates will participate in an economy fueled by successful innovation...
The LEAP States Initiative

The LEAP States Initiative offers educators and leaders in state systems an opportunity to collaborate on projects related to the 11 LEAP States. The LEAP States Initiative is a partnership between AAC&U and the national LEAP project. The LEAP States Initiative is a collaborative effort to improve the quality of undergraduate education in the participating states. The LEAP States Initiative is based on the belief that every student should have access to high-quality education that prepares them for success in college and in life.

LEAP STATES GOALS INCLUDE

- Promoting large-scale cooperation among LEAP States to improve the quality of undergraduate education.
- Supporting educators through a network of resources to improve the quality of undergraduate education.
- Building partnerships with other organizations to enhance the quality of undergraduate education.
- Fostering innovation to improve the quality of undergraduate education.
- Supporting research and evaluation to improve the quality of undergraduate education.

SELECTED LEAP STATES INITIATIVES

- Building partnerships with other organizations to enhance the quality of undergraduate education.
- Fostering innovation to improve the quality of undergraduate education.
- Supporting research and evaluation to improve the quality of undergraduate education.

The LEAP States Initiative and the LEAP project offer educators and leaders in state systems an opportunity to collaborate on projects related to improving the quality of undergraduate education. The LEAP States Initiative is based on the belief that every student should have access to high-quality education that prepares them for success in college and in life.
and engage with diverse communities that urgently need solutions to intractable problems. Our graduates will have to secure environmental sustainability, find ways to maintain human dignity and promote equity in an increasingly polarized nation, and manage a world rife with conflict. They will need to balance family and career in a climate that increasingly devalues personal privacy and presents obstacles to flourishing.

Negotiating such a complex and challenging environment requires an education that explores issues from multiple perspectives and across disciplines and that helps students apply what they learn to real-world situations. Signature Work is a powerful way for students to integrate the various elements of their education and to apply their learning in meaningful ways.

Understanding Signature Work: Tapping motivation
In Signature Work, each student addresses one or more problems that matter—both to the individual student and to society as a whole. A problem may be related to a contemporary issue that needs a practical solution, or to an enduring concept, such as freedom, integrity, or justice.

Through Signature Work, students immerse themselves in exploration, choosing the questions they want to study and preparing to explain the significance of their work to others. This process helps students develop the capacities (e.g., for investigation, evidence-based reasoning, and constructive collaboration) required to grapple with problems where the “right answer” is still unknown and where any answer may be actively contested.

Of course, colleges and universities can and should assess a student’s Signature Work for evidence of proficiency on key learning outcomes. But the value of Signature Work goes far beyond assessment. It taps students’ own motivations, kindling imagination and providing opportunities for in-depth learning that go well beyond the traditional compilation of course credits, grades, and credentials.

Signature Work also plays a central role in preparing students to navigate through ongoing and often disruptive change. The world is evolving quickly. And in today’s economy, graduates are likely to move into new jobs, or even new careers, multiple times. These transitions may require new skills or even personal reinvention. More than ever before, students’ ability to tap their own inner resources—their sense of purpose, ethical compass, and resilience—will be an important component of success in work and life.

“Employers do not want . . . students prepared for narrow workforce specialties. . . . Virtually all occupational endeavors require a working appreciation of the historical, cultural, ethical, and global environments that surround application of skilled work.”
—Roberts T. Jones, President, Education Workforce Policy, LLC
Building skills employers require
Signature Work can help every student get more out of higher education and prepare more effectively for work and life. It helps students integrate their major area of study with other disciplines and apply what they have learned to real-world situations.

According to a recent survey, 93 percent of employers believe that critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving abilities are more important than a potential employee’s undergraduate major. Nearly all the employers surveyed (95 percent) give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to contribute to innovation in the workplace.3

Signature Work in action
Signature Work is underway at colleges and universities across the country. The names and approaches differ, but the concept of students taking the lead on complex learning is the same. Following are selected examples:
• The Integrated Concentration in Science (iCons) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is a set of interdisciplinary, problem-based courses for students majoring in fields across the sciences, engineering, and public health. Students take one course each of their first three years and complete a yearlong independent research project during their senior year. iCons courses use a case-study model, with case studies focused on the evolving role of science in addressing unsolved social or health problems.
• LaGuardia Community College engages students with learning communities anchored by development of individual electronic portfolios. Students use the e-portfolios to display their best work as well as to track and reflect on their own progress in achieving their academic, work, and life goals. LaGuardia’s curricular pathways also provide opportunities to engage with and apply learning in the diverse neighborhoods surrounding the college.
• The College of Wooster requires every student to complete an in-depth senior research project called Independent Study.

SAMPLE GUIDED PATHWAY WITH SIGNATURE WORK
Preparing students to do Signature Work will require thoughtful redesign of curricular pathways. This example of a general education pathway is rich in problem-based learning. It can be integrated with any well-designed major. Students taking this pathway would develop core intellectual skills and knowledge through exploration of big questions, and they would be required to apply their learning in their own Signature Work.

E-portfolio shows student’s problem-based learning and proficiencies over time

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<th>First-Year Inquiry and College Writing</th>
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<td>Cross-Cultural and Global Studies</td>
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|                                     | Signature Work A student’s best work, which can take many forms (e.g., capstone, internship, field work, research, communibased research

*For students in two-year degree programs, this work is Signature Work. For students in four-year degree programs, it is preparation for Signature Work. Transfer students may take the second-year inquiry seminar at the original institution or following transfer.
The entire curriculum builds students’ capacity for this project, so by senior year, students are able to research effectively.

- Cornell University recently announced the launch of Engaged Cornell, an effort to make community engagement a hallmark of its undergraduate program. Over the next ten years, across all its colleges, Cornell aims to expand curricula that incorporate learning experiences in communities, guided by a set of cross-disciplinary learning outcomes and good practices for community partnerships. By 2025, the initiative aims to provide the opportunity for every student to participate in community engagement, at home or around the world.

**Liberal Education and America’s Promise**

The LEAP Challenge is part of the next phase of AAC&U’s ongoing initiative, Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP). Launched in 2005, LEAP asks core questions about the learning students most need from college, listens and responds as employers make the case that today’s workers need to be better prepared for a global economy, and focuses on education for knowledgeable and responsible citizenship, as well as careers.

The LEAP vision includes a commitment to

- Essential Learning Outcomes—the learning outcomes essential for success in life and work in the twenty-first century (see sidebar at left);
- High-Impact Educational Practices—first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects;
- Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE)—using students’ own work and faculty-validated VALUE rubrics to probe whether each student is making progress on the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and can apply his or her learning to complex problems and real-world challenges;
- Inclusive Excellence—ensuring that all students at every kind of institution benefit from a deep, hands-on, and practical liberal education that prepares them for success in work, life, and citizenship.

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**THE LEAP ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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

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

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

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

**Intellectual and Practical Skills, Including**

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

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

**Personal and Social Responsibility, Including**

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

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

**Integrative and Applied Learning, Including**

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

  *Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*
THE LEAP PRINCIPLES OF EXCELLENCE

The LEAP Principles of Excellence offer both challenging standards and flexible guidance so they can support high-quality learning at any college or university. These principles can be used to guide change and to influence practice across the disciplines and in general education programs. Signature Work is a natural outgrowth of these principles.

**Principle One**  
Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive  
Make the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes a framework for the entire educational experience, connecting school, college, work, and life.

**Principle Two**  
Give Students a Compass  
Focus each student’s plan of study on achieving the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—and assess progress.

**Principle Three**  
Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation  
Immerse all students in analysis, discovery, problem solving, and communication, beginning in school and advancing in college.

**Principle Four**  
Engage the Big Questions  
Teach through the curriculum to far-reaching issues—contemporary and enduring—in science and society, cultures and values, global interdependence, the changing economy, and human dignity and freedom.

**Principle Five**  
Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action  
Prepare students for citizenship and work through engaged and guided learning that is focused on “real-world” problems.

**Principle Six**  
Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning  
Emphasize personal and social responsibility in every field of study.

**Principle Seven**  
Assess Students’ Ability to Apply Learning to Complex Problems  
Use assessment to deepen learning and to establish a culture of shared purpose and continuous improvement.

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“I learned the absolute most from my research project... with the professor as well as [from] my capstone experience because both of those fostered independent learning.”

—Student participant in LEAP focus group

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**LEAP strategies for change**

Hundreds of institutions and a growing roster of state systems now are using the LEAP framework of Essential Learning Outcomes, High-Impact Educational Practices, VALUE Assessments, and Inclusive Excellence.

The LEAP Challenge is intended to help institutions take their foundational work on liberal education and inclusive excellence to the next level. The long-term goal is to ensure that every one of our students reaps the full benefit of an empowering liberal education, no matter what his or her background, intended major, or career and life aspirations may be. There are many pathways leading to the achievement and demonstration of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes through Signature Work. Each of our students deserves our help in finding the pathway that’s right for him or her.

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

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**NOTES**

4. The list of LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes was developed through a multiyear dialogue with employers and with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. For more information, see Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2007); AAC&U, The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers’ Views (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2011); or visit www.aacu.org/leap.
At the centennial annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider introduced the LEAP Challenge, the next phase of AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative. The LEAP Challenge calls on all colleges and universities to engage their students in “Signature Work” that will prepare them to integrate and apply their learning to a significant project.\(^1\)

Signature Work does not describe any one pedagogical practice or educational approach. A Signature Work project can take on many forms, though it must meet several criteria. First, Signature Work requires student agency and independence: students choose the topic and form of the project, and complete much of the work independently, with guidance and coaching from faculty, staff, or community partners, over the course of a semester or a longer period of time. Second, the project must be integrative, meaning that it requires students to draw on the skills and knowledge they have developed across many disciplines, through their general education and their major, and through cocurricular activities. Finally, Signature Work project must address “big problems”—students should apply their learning to real-world issues that matter to society and to the student.\(^2\)

It’s important to note that while the term Signature Work may be new, the learning principles it embodies are drawn from the pedagogical practices AAC&U’s member institutions have engaged in for many years. This article highlights some of the work being done at eight institutions of higher education to bring Signature Work to all their students. I have focused on three broad categories of learning practices—applied and community-based learning, capstones and culminating experiences, and e-portfolios—that, as practiced at these colleges and universities, exemplify integrative, student-centered learning at a broad range of institutional types, from research universities to community colleges. This survey is by no means comprehensive, but the examples here represent some of the crucial aspects of Signature Work as currently practiced in the field.

**Community engagement and applied learning**

With its emphasis on applied learning and active inquiry, Signature Work often occurs in the context of students’ engagement with communities outside the classroom. Not only does community-engaged learning require students to address real-world issues, raising the stakes for students’ personal investment in their learning, but the problems students address with community partners are inherently interdisciplinary, requiring students to integrate knowledge and skills from a broad range of courses taken in both general education and the major.

Cornell University has spent the last five years expanding community-engagement efforts across campus as part of its 2010–2015 strategic plan,\(^3\) which names excellence in public engagement as one of the institution’s primary goals. One of the first steps toward this goal was the creation of the Engaged Learning and Research Center in 2011, which now serves as the focal point for all community-engagement activities at Cornell. In 2014, the university launched Engaged Cornell, a ten-year initiative intended to expand on the goals set in the strategic plan and “establish community engagement and real-world learning experiences as the hallmark of the Cornell undergraduate experience.”\(^4\)

Cornell already has a long history of community engagement, says Vice Provost Judy Appleton,\(^5\) who leads Engaged Cornell, with an...
outside the classroom

even though they are especially strong in some of the social science departments. But Engaged Cornell aims to increase students’ community engagement in every department and school within the university, especially in those departments that aren’t traditionally associated with community-engaged learning. The initiative is supported by a grant from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, and the first round of funding has been designated for faculty development, supporting the creation of new community-engaged courses and the modification of existing courses to include cocurricular community engagement.

It’s important to note that there is no community engagement requirement in the Cornell curriculum, but through Engaged Cornell, the university hopes to expand engagement opportunities so that every student has ready access to such opportunities. “We take a broad definition of community as we approach it so every discipline can approach it,” Appleton says. “That can be a business community or a geographical one, local or regional, interest groups, age groups such as children, veterans—any group with a shared need is a community.”

Other opportunities occur in the cocurriculum. The Social Justice Roundtable series is a monthly forum for discussing social justice issues affecting the university and the surrounding community, while Be the Change Workshops delve into the topics discussed at these workshops and focus on potential solutions. At both types of events, students share facilitating responsibilities with faculty and staff. Students who are able to commit more time can apply to the Fellowship for Undergraduate Engaged Leadership, a cohort-based program that prepares students to complete a community-engaged capstone project through training in leadership development and service-learning theory, and close mentorship from Cornell faculty, staff, and alumni.

Similar to Cornell, the University of La Verne includes “community and civic engagement” as a core pillar of its latest strategic vision, and all students at La Verne are involved in multiple civic and community-engaged learning experiences. A private university with multiple campuses in Southern California, La Verne takes a highly structured approach to community engagement, channeling students into these learning opportunities through the La Verne Experience, which President Devorah Lieberman describes as a “cocurricular/curricular/values-based program threaded throughout all four years.”

The first and second years of the La Verne Experience in particular emphasize applied learning through community engagement. In the First-Year Learning Experience, all students enroll in interdisciplinary learning communities that address broad questions and social issues and include service-learning components. In Markets and the Good Life, for example, students use the lenses of microeconomics and philosophy to examine “the economic, philosophical, and ethical implications of markets, free will, and the choices humans make,” Lieberman says. As part of the course, students volunteer at a local transitional house for women and families, assisting with cleanup and engaging in guided reflection on the idea of “the good life” with faculty and residents of the facility.

The Sophomore La Verne Experience (SoLVE) focuses explicitly on infusing the curriculum with cocurricular activities, including service learning and community engagement. In order to make this integration explicit and to foster deliberate reflection on the connections between the curriculum and cocurriculum, SoLVE includes a required two-credit seminar focused on the values of the institution and how they are embodied in the cocurricular activities in which students participate. In the Junior La Verne Experience, students apply their previous learning outside the classroom with greater autonomy as they design a capstone project that addresses a real-world problem.

Mount Holyoke College, a private women’s liberal arts college in Massachusetts, also includes an explicit requirement that all students participate in some kind of applied learning experience outside the classroom, usually taking place in the summer after the sophomore or junior year. This project is the centerpiece of Lynk, Mount Holyoke’s curriculum-to-careers initiative. This requirement can be fulfilled by a broad range of experiences, so long as they are student-designed and require the student to apply her learning to a real-world problem in a setting outside the classroom. Some students develop projects that address community issues, but others engage in field research, complete internships, or conduct hands-on projects while studying abroad.

With its emphasis on applied learning and active inquiry, Signature Work often occurs in the context of students’ engagement with communities outside the classroom.
To prepare students to work independently outside the classroom, Mount Holyoke faculty and staff provide considerable scaffolding, says Kirk Lange, director of international experiential learning. Advising is crucial to the enterprise, and students have extensive discussions with faculty advisors about their interests and learning goals before proposing a specific project. After proposing a project, each student meets again with her advisor and with a sponsor from the off-campus site, such as a supervisor for an internship or a contact person in a community-based organization, in order to discuss the specific learning goals of the project and the needs of any community partners that are involved.

Mount Holyoke is able to make such projects a requirement in part because it offers the funding to carry them out—each student can receive up to $3,600 to support the completion of an applied learning project. Advisors offer logistical support to help students prepare a budget and find housing in other regions or countries. Although funding is guaranteed, the application process is extensive, requiring further discussion of the project’s goals and learning outcomes. “This application has become a learning tool in itself, further stitching together the work on campus and beyond the gates,” Lange says.

Further scaffolding is built into the curriculum. Before leaving campus to begin an experiential project, students must complete College 210: Ready for the World—Preparing for Your Internship and Research Project, a half-semester seminar in which students discuss how to apply the skills from their academic studies in a professional of community setting. A second course, College 211: Tying It All Together, is required for students to complete their experiential projects, and focuses on integrating academic work with students’ goals beyond college. A final reflective piece comes in the senior year, when students present the results of their research projects or discuss the work they did in internships or community initiatives at a series of symposia open to the entire college community.

Capstones and culminating projects
The La Verne Experience and the Lynk program at Mount Holyoke College are representative of applied, often community-based learning programs, but they also include many elements of capstone projects. In capstones, students design projects by drawing on their learning from across their coursework and in the cocurriculum in order to address a topic or issue of their choosing, usually in the junior or senior year. Portland State University’s capstone program meets these characteristics, while also requiring that students’ capstone projects address real-world problems faced by communities in the Portland, Oregon, area.

Portland State’s program is also different from the capstone programs at many institutions in that the student projects at Portland State are generated through established capstone courses in which any student can enroll, rather than each student creating his or her own independent study course. The senior capstone courses are the culminating piece of Portland State’s general education program, says Seanna Kerrigan, director of the capstone program, and so all courses must be submitted to the faculty senate in order to ensure that they further the university’s learning outcomes. Faculty are encouraged to use a backward design approach when creating capstone courses so that “they
will have thought through the university learning goals, the community issue, and how students will learn by addressing that issue,” Kerrigan says.

The Portland State capstone program is also distinctive in that students must complete their capstone projects working in teams. A typical course enrolls up to sixteen students, who will divide into teams of four students to complete semi-independent projects in the context of the course. In a course that focuses on grant writing for a community organization—a common structure for capstone courses—each student team will write a separate grant. In a course that focuses on an educational program, one team of students might write a grant for a new transportation van, while another team writes a grant for scholarships and other students write grants for supplies. In other courses, students might build websites, launch a fundraising campaign, or volunteer at the facilities of the community partner, depending on the learning outcomes for the course, the students’ interests, and the needs of the community partner.

Most students complete their capstones through one of the established courses, but students who have already found a community partner, designed a project, and received approval from a faculty advisor can enroll in a capstone course titled Effective Change Agent. Like the other capstone courses, Effective Change Agent enrolls up to sixteen students, though each student has developed his or her own project to serve the needs of a different community partner. Students still meet as a class with an instructor to discuss assigned readings and reflect on the university’s general education goals and how they apply to each student’s project. The course offers “a good blend of structure and student self-determination,” Kerrigan says.

The College of Wooster, a private liberal arts college in Ohio, also requires all students to complete a culminating project in their senior year, although the structure of the program and the range of student options differ from those at Portland State. All capstone projects at Wooster are framed as undergraduate research, but the form that research takes varies according to each discipline and each student’s individual project.

Independent Study, as the capstone is known at Wooster, is completed during the senior year, but the scaffolding for the project begins in the required first-year seminar, which focuses on critical inquiry, and many students also apply to participate in the Sophomore Research Program, in which students serve as paid research assistants to professors in every discipline. In the junior year, students enroll in a seminar in which they explore the range of projects available in their major fields and study relevant methodologies so that they are prepared to meet faculty advisors and propose projects for the senior year.

Work on the final Independent Study projects spans both semesters of the senior year. Students meet individually with their project advisors for one hour each week and “plan, develop, and complete a significant piece of original research, scholarship, or creative expression—culminating in a major research paper, an art exhibit or a performance—that pulls together what [they’ve] learned and demonstrates the analytical, creative, and communication skills [they] have honed at Wooster.” Laboratory space on campus is provided for students conducting research in the physical and biological sciences, as is studio space for students working

E-portfolios offer the chance for students to integrate the learning they have achieved over the course of their entire college career, in multiple disciplines and in the cocurriculum.
E-portfolios
Like capstone projects, e-portfolios offer the chance for students to integrate the learning they have achieved over the course of their entire college career, in multiple disciplines and in the cocurriculum. E-portfolios are digital repositories of student learning artifacts selected by the students themselves. Combined with rubrics, such as AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics, e-portfolios can be effective tools for assessment, both on the individual course and institutional levels, but the act of preparing an e-portfolio for assessment also offers an opportunity for students to engage in reflection about their learning. As they select representative learning artifacts, students must think deeply about the college’s learning outcomes, the degree to which they have achieved these learning outcomes, and which assignments are representative of these achievements, says Gail Ring, director of e-portfolio initiatives at Clemson University. Like capstone projects, e-portfolios facilitate integrative thinking, prompting students to draw together strands of learning from a range of disciplines and from the cocurriculum. Indeed, e-portfolios can amplify the benefits of other types of Signature Work because they encourage students to integrate learning from applied learning experiences with their classroom learning, and curating and reflecting on assignments from previous courses is excellent preparation for culminating projects.

Until recently, Clemson University required all students to create e-portfolios, which were used for assessment of the university’s general education learning outcomes. “When a student put in an artifact—a study abroad paper, say—she had to write a rational statement explaining why she chose this piece of evidence, how it demonstrates a learning outcome like cross-cultural awareness,” Ring says. “You’re learning a lot when you study abroad, much more than just language immersion. Reflecting on that in a paper, and coming back and reading that paper and connecting to future course work, that’s incredibly powerful.”

But Clemson’s faculty rolled back the e-portfolio requirement, despite the potential learning gains for students, because they determined that they were not providing sufficient scaffolding to help students think meaningfully about how they curate their portfolios throughout their years at the university. Clemson students begin work in the university’s general education program in their first semester, but they may not be prepared to think reflectively about what they are learning and document those reflections without explicit guidance from faculty, Ring says. Too many students were arriving at the senior year having done little or no work on their e-portfolios.

“The power of the portfolio is the reflection over time for growth,” Ring continues. “But without faculty integration, it wasn’t happening. They need us to help unpack the competencies, and the more we do that early on, the more students can do that on their own.” The faculty senate voted to remove the university-wide portfolio requirement, though many colleges and programs still require that their students complete e-portfolios, and the campus e-portfolio office offers workshops and individual guidance for students who are interested in creating a portfolio on their own. The number of students creating portfolios continues to grow—more than 30 percent of undergraduate students are now creating e-portfolios that they use in a reflective capacity, Ring estimates—and even without a university-wide requirement, it’s becoming a distinctive feature of Clemson, she says: “We’ve had job-seeking students who...
met with potential employers that said, ‘Oh, you’re from Clemson—let us see your e-portfolio.’”

While Clemson pulled back on its e-portfolio program because of a failure to properly scaffold the process for using them, Santa Clara University is looking to expand e-portfolio use precisely because the tool offers opportunities to scaffold learning when implemented deliberately. The university is piloting a program in which students complete an e-portfolio as part of Pathways, the upper-division portion of Santa Clara’s general education program. Students complete four Pathways courses, which are grouped in a thematic cluster, during their junior and senior years, and shortly before graduation write a reflective essay that integrates concepts from these courses and other courses completed in their majors.

As part of a pilot study, select groups of students are using e-portfolios to track their Pathways work. The idea is to encourage students to engage in the reflective thinking that epitomizes the final essay throughout their time at Santa Clara, says Chris Bachen, director of assessment at Santa Clara. Before the introduction of e-portfolios, many students didn’t think much about the final essay until graduation approached. By introducing e-portfolios, and encouraging students to update their e-portfolios on a regular basis, faculty hope to encourage students to think more progressively and longitudinally about the connections between these various courses and about their own learning gains over time, Bachen says. The pilot includes groups of students who are working independently on e-portfolios, and groups who meet regularly to discuss their e-portfolio reflections with faculty facilitators.

The pilot is still ongoing, but results so far suggest adjustments will be needed before the program can be brought to scale. While some students have adopted regular, reflective practice with their e-portfolios, many others view e-portfolio use as simply another requirement, rather than something that will enhance their learning. There are also some students who have crafted their e-portfolios to be explicitly “outward looking”—presenting their accomplishments for potential employers—rather than using them as tools for personal reflection on their learning. Bachen and her colleagues working on the pilot recommend that, as the university looks to scale the program, e-portfolios should be integrated into a required course or program in the first year so that all students will have early, faculty-led practice in “archiving work, selecting appropriate work samples to exemplify specific learning outcomes, and reflecting on that work with attention to how the learning is scaffolded or integrated.”

LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York system, is also using e-portfolios as an integrated part of a college-wide curriculum, says Bret Eynon, associate dean for teaching and learning. Faculty use e-portfolios to target three dimensions of student learning. First, creating and curating the e-portfolio offers students practice in multimedia digital communication—a crucial skill in the twenty-first century. Second, e-portfolios encourage integrative thinking across disciplines. Finally, e-portfolios can help students become more reflective and intentional about their learning: the e-portfolios help them track their own progress across their educational careers and become more self-aware of their transformation, which, in turn, prompts them to take more ownership over their learning, Eynon says.

The introduction of e-portfolios coincides with a larger reorganization of the college, in which the academic affairs and student affairs departments now work together much more closely and the curriculum and cocurriculum are becoming increasingly integrated. Students create e-portfolios during required courses for their major programs, but they are also asked to incorporate learning artifacts and reflections from their general education courses and from their cocurricular activities. Faculty hope the use of e-portfolios will help prepare degree-seeking students for the capstone projects they will
complete in their majors. Students also share their e-portfolios with their advisors, which both offers students a chance to reflect on their learning in a one-on-one session with faculty or staff mentors and facilitates the use of the portfolio as a map for charting a path toward completion. LaGuardia has been scaling up the program slowly, but the college hopes that 90 percent of enrolled students will have created an e-portfolio by next year.

Engaging all students in Signature Work

The three types of student work presented above are by no means discrete categories. The Lynk program at Mount Holyoke College and the La Verne Experience at the University of La Verne both use community-engaged projects as preparation for culminating capstone work. Similarly, the capstone courses at Portland State University all involve engagement with community partners, as do some of the capstones completed by students at the College of Wooster. And in all the e-portfolio programs described above, the portfolio is used as a tool to integrate learning from both traditional classroom studies and applied learning experiences, often in preparation for a capstone or culminating experience. The fact that these programs integrate all these aspects of deep learning is what makes them representative of Signature Work.

But while these examples are representative, they are far from comprehensive. This article barely scratches the surface of the deep, interdisciplinary, student-centered learning happening at AAC&U member institutions around the country. There are many, many other examples of Signature Work happening at colleges and universities of all types, but too often these essential learning practices are reserved for a limited set of students at any given institution. The LEAP Challenge calls on all colleges and universities to make Signature Work the expectation for all students.

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

NOTES
5. Personal communication. Unless otherwise noted, quotations and other information presented in this article are gathered from interviews conducted by the author.
10. Ibid.
ABOUT THIS SERIES
Marking the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the association, this four-part series of commissioned articles explores various aspects of AAC&U’s work over the past century in relation to contemporaneous developments within American higher education more broadly. This article is the first in the series.

When 150 college executives gathered in Chicago in 1915 to create the Association of American Colleges (AAC), they chose inclusiveness and interhelpfulness as twin themes to animate their organization. These ideas made a sensible clarion call for small colleges in the early twentieth century: universities were in ascendance, growing in size and curriculum, privileging science and research, viewing liberal education and religion—formerly the foundation for all collegiate education—as mere outposts best served by the small colleges.

Inclusiveness allowed many colleges that were feeling outside the growing circle of university influence to find their place within AAC. Although most of the members were small private colleges with religious bases, the founding group also welcomed a municipal university, several polytechnic institutes, and a number of publicly supported schools. Interhelpfulness was the key, as these institutions struggled to define and reassert their importance in the changing landscape and to share ideas about effective practice.

The twin ideals have guided AAC throughout its history, even when more trendy educational notions took turns at popularity. This article examines four moments during AAC’s first hundred years, showing how the themes sometimes worked well in tandem, and at other times surfaced tension. The founding years saw both ideals serving members well, allowing the new organization to thrive. Within a few years, AAC’s inclusiveness had made it an appealing partner, leading to joint efforts with the American Association of University Professors in 1925 and again in 1940 to define academic freedom and tenure for the country’s faculty. Interhelpfulness dominated AAC’s agenda after World War II, when the federal role in higher education was poised to change; here, however, AAC began to find inclusiveness at odds with a single position on the desirability of federal aid. Although the organization managed those differences, the issue rose again during the 1970s when federal lobbying became key to success. At that point, the organization redefined inclusiveness as commitment to liberal education rather than institutional type. Thus, when the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities branched out from AAC in 1976, AAC rededicated itself to the principles of liberal education, eventually changing its own name to openly claim the universities that had long sought partnership around educational goals.

The founding years
Although the founding members of AAC claimed the new organization was not “an implement of defense,” they nonetheless acknowledged that, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, small colleges were “being attacked savagely enough.” Robert L. Kelly, the Earlham College president who became AAC’s first executive director (1915–37), identified those attackers at the second annual meeting in 1916:

LINDA EISENMANN

“Making Better Colleges”
AAC’s Century of Change and Commitment

LINDA EISENMANN

is professor of education, professor of history, and provost at Wheaton College (Massachusetts).
The Association of American Colleges (AAC) is established in Chicago with 160 founding members.

Brown University
The high school is becoming supremely conscious of itself and in places it would encroach upon the field of the college from below. The University in like manner would reach down from above and appropriate some of the territory of the college. . . . The tax-supported institutions would sap its vitality by demonstrating the complete ability of the state to educate all the children from the kindergarten to the Doctor's degree and for the needlessness therefore of the independent foundations. A certain type of business man would point out the futility of college education as judged by the helpfulness of the college product. The vocational expert would storm the centres of American culture with a pitchfork and a monkey-wrench. And worse than all this, certain builders of educational systems would actually ignore the college and go on about their business as though the college did not exist.2

The early-twentieth century was a moment of increasing differentiation for higher education, and its diverse members began to form associations for support and impact. Only forty-three higher education groups were formed in the century between 1800 and 1900, yet seventy were created between just 1900 and 1919.1 Land-grant institutions, public universities, and large universities all had separate groups. When fourteen prominent associations banded together as a wartime emergency council in World War I, the American Council on Education (ACE) was created in 1918 to give order to their efforts. With its principle of inclusiveness, AAC became the biggest of the higher education groups, counting 190 members in 1916.

The core membership was a large group of religious institutions that for many years had gathered as the Christian Colleges Boards of Education (CCBE). In the nineteenth century, religion—specifically, Christianity—was part and parcel of collegiate education. Only with the rise of science and research did religious education become more a subject for collegiate study than an enlivening pedagogical force. Over time, small colleges and religious institutions continued to comfortably identify liberal education with religious education, while the universities increasingly distanced themselves.4 Thus, AAC’s early inclusiveness presumed comfort with religious education as an aspect of classical, liberal training; early on, a third of AAC’s annual meetings featured sessions on religion.5 Some larger schools teaching professional subjects joined AAC to foster liberal education in their undergraduate programs.

Interhelpfulness was a serious commitment for the organization. As Executive Director Kelly explained, AAC’s goals were “learning the truth about the colleges, telling the truth about the colleges, making better colleges.”6 To do so, AAC organized via committees and commissions (the latter featuring larger topics and longer lives) and conducted surveys, summarized significant legislation, advised about collective purchasing, reviewed curricular approaches, explored faculty sabbaticals and hiring, examined campus athletics, and advised the government on classification systems. In early meetings, AAC discussed “the efficient college,” outlining the curriculum, faculty, student body, budget, plant, equipment, and endowment necessary to support colleges at the minimum, the average, and—ideally—the efficient levels.7

All these efforts guided the small colleges at a time when mutual support was vital and information was necessary. The annual meeting intentionally became “the great rallying point for the college officers of the country,” consciously planned by AAC as its “leading implement of inspiration.”8 The quarterly Bulletin expanded from an early focus on organizational reporting to a generalist’s magazine on college issues that “has attempted to present a vital theory of liberal education both in its editorial policy and general contents.”9

Although inclusiveness was somewhat strained by the presence of nonreligious and larger schools, and interhelpfulness was affected by those differences, AAC’s early years nevertheless provided real sustenance to college leaders who otherwise were seeing their institutions dwarfed by growing neighbors.

A desirable partner

One place where all institutions shared the need for interhelpfulness was in managing faculty, from initial appointments and long-term contracts to shared governance and disciplinary actions. In the early-twentieth century, faculty found little consistency or security in either the length of appointments or the conditions under which they could be terminated. Even by the 1930s, many full professors rarely had
contracts beyond one year, and few schools included a faculty role in dismissal procedures. The protections of tenure did not yet widely exist, and in a national context that saw periodic challenges of war, communism, labor unrest, and strident nationalism, professors could find their scholarly writing, classroom teaching, and extramural speech questioned.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) was founded in 1915, the same year that AAC colleges banded together. Whereas AAC had an institutional perspective, the AAUP took the professorship as its focus, aiming to assert and support working conditions that would allow faculty members freedom to pursue their work while retaining the flexibility of citizens to hold opinions. The AAUP was created in the wake of several cases where faculty members were dismissed over disagreements with their institutions, trustees, or the public.

Increasingly, the AAUP was asked to support individual professors under duress, and quickly found itself overburdened with requests to investigate cases—a task not part of its original intent. Rather, the group had sought to establish principles of academic freedom and tenure to pursue their work while retaining the flexibility of citizens to hold opinions. The AAUP was created in the wake of several cases where faculty members were dismissed over disagreements with their institutions, trustees, or the public.

Increasingly, the AAUP was asked to support individual professors under duress, and quickly found itself overburdened with requests to investigate cases—a task not part of its original intent. Rather, the group had sought to establish principles of academic freedom and tenure, laying out its first statement in 1915. Recognizing the need for further refinement, the AAUP began to look for partners to help craft principles with wider acceptability.

ACE assumed the role of matchmaker, urging its members to partner with the AAUP on a revised statement of principles. Most higher education associations had already created committees to consider academic freedom and tenure from their particular perspectives; AAC created such a standing committee as early as its second meeting, although the committee worked only sporadically over the next several years. Since AAC members were represented by college presidents, it naturally took an institutional perspective on the professoriate, particularly seeking clarity on hiring, termination, and governance.

Perhaps surprisingly, AAC emerged as a leader in the relationship with the AAUP. As its membership expanded to include the liberal arts components of larger schools, AAC had recognized the need to consider academic freedom across a range of settings. In 1922, AAC had advanced its own statement of principles, which closely resembled that of the AAUP.

The biggest differences were AAC’s enhanced flexibility for institutional religious interests and less flexibility for utterances in classroom teaching than in research. When ACE brought seven institutional associations together with the AAUP in 1925, the work resulted in a statement that, in many ways, laid the groundwork for the 1940 Statement of Principles that still organizes most institutions’ approaches to faculty appointments, tenure, and academic freedom. Even though, of the groups present, only AAC adopted the joint 1925 statement, the stage nevertheless was set for a subsequent round of discussions with the AAUP.

The 1930s were marked by widespread anti-communist activity, challenges to individual teachers, and the introduction of loyalty oaths, all prompting new interest in clarifying academic appointments. Simultaneously, new educational unions—notably, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association—began to challenge the AAUP’s relationship with colleges and universities, pushing the AAUP to define itself as the higher education leader.

This era also demonstrated that earlier statements on academic freedom and appointments had not solidified colleges’ approaches. AAC’s presidents were ready to try the relationship with the AAUP again. Although the partnership was not consistently smooth, AAC had demonstrated a disposition to consider professorial concerns, while the AAUP had shown willingness to work with administrators. Working together, AAC pushed for certain considerations, notably: recognizing professors' specialties as places where they should focus their speech; allowing extramural utterances, even while recognizing that professors have special obligations as citizens; allowing a faculty role in investigations of colleagues; and agreeing on a seven-year probationary period for hires. Ultimately, the two organizations crafted a statement in 1940 that set the terms for modern approaches to faculty hiring and protections surrounding academic freedom.

AAC and the AAUP were the first to endorse the 1940 Statement, which little by little was adopted by many of the other organizations. The size and scope of AAC membership made it a strong and efficacious partner for the AAUP and a leader among the institutional groups. The need for interhelpfulness among its varied members had galvanized AAC’s efforts,
The size and scope of AAC membership made it a strong and efficacious partner for the AAUP and a leader among the institutional groups.
PCHE’s report was far ahead of judicial and social acceptance for using legislation to ensure equality. This issue prompted considerable debate at AAC’s 1948 meeting, resulting in two dissents from the president of Howard University, who urged his colleagues to be bolder in accepting the presidential commission’s broad-minded stance on discrimination. Although AAC was more progressive than most higher education associations in its welcome to historically black colleges,26 this push for federal legislation was further than many members were prepared to go.

The final concern surfaced another long-standing difference among members: commitment to religion and support for schools that practiced it. From its CCBE origins, AAC had always fostered discussion of religious education, seeing it as thoroughly compatible with liberal education. Several AAC members resented PCHE’s apparent dismissal of the importance of religion in education. Yet AAC’s own Commission on Christian Higher Education urged a more reasoned view, saying “the Report can be seen not as threat but as challenge to the churches and their colleges.” AAC schools should not oppose “the extension of educational opportunity” simply because they were not slated for public funds; rather, they should focus on “not competition but supplementation, coordination and cooperation,” putting energy into the small segment of education where they excelled.27

AAC’s organizational stance against certain PCHE recommendations—especially the role of federal aid—put it at odds with many of its own members who had already benefitted from federal largesse, and stood to gain in the future. The commitment to inclusiveness that had been so appealing to the AAUP partnership and that consistently found AAC active in Washington policy discussions was now challenging the twinned commitment to interhelpfulness: not everyone was helped by the same policies.

**The commitments resolved**

Much changed between higher education and the federal government over succeeding decades. As Snavely and others predicted, federal aid expanded not only through students—the GI Bill was succeeded by numerous federal programs—but also through the Higher Education Act of 1965 and other expansive efforts. Higher education associations recognized the increasing

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1944

Enactment of the **Servicemen’s Readjustment Act**, popularly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, provides returning veterans of the Second World War with a range of benefits, including funds for college education.
need for close attention to Washington policy and practice, and for lobbying on their own behalf.

Most of the organizations had a clear focus for their lobbying, but the challenges that inclusiveness had raised for AAC after World War II continued to confuse its clarity. Even with its large group of public institutions (about one-sixth of the membership), AAC continued to be conservative on federal aid. A meeting of more than a hundred representatives from independent colleges and organizations in 1967 to discuss the lack of a group dedicated to their concerns highlighted the issue.

As the 1960s progressed, AAC enacted its interest in advocating for the independent sector, mixed membership notwithstanding. It established a formal relationship with the Federation of State Associations of Independent Colleges and Universities (FSAICU), providing office space, staff, and funding at its Washington headquarters. Within several years—in a pattern reminiscent of AAC’s own gradual growth in and separation from CCBE—FSAICU reorganized into the National Council of Independent Colleges and Universities, still housed at AAC, under its president’s supervision, and serving all the private institutions belonging to AAC.

At this point, the publicly-supported members of AAC voiced resentment with expending organizational funds, space, and time on a program so clearly at odds with their interests. AAC created a special commission to examine the issue, and its 1976 report clarified the decision point: AAC could either oust the independent college lobby or risk losing its public members. The decision was for the former, and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) was created as a separate organization, no longer affiliated with AAC.

The creation of NAICU clarified for AAC that its original focus on liberal education was the glue holding its membership together. Inclusion was now real: all schools with a commitment to liberal learning, regardless of their source of support, could be active AAC participants. And interhelpfulness would play out by addressing challenges to liberal education in an increasingly professionalized higher education system, regardless of the implications of federal decisions.

The themes sustained

In 1995, when AAC changed its name to AAC&U—the Association of Colleges and Universities—the shift recognized that larger institutions were an active, vital part of the organization. The change was more than corrective nomenclature, however. Large institutions—both public and private—had supported the organization from its beginning, as part of an ongoing inquiry into how higher education could sustain the values and impact of liberal learning through constant cycles of change. In 1915, it is unlikely that the organization’s founders could have foreseen the specific challenges to its goals, but they would doubtless extol the renewed engagement with liberal learning that continues to animate the association after a century of effort.

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

NOTES

1. Because AAC&U did not add “universities” to its name until 1995, this article refers throughout to the original name, Association of American Colleges.
6. Ibid., 32.
7. See, as a specific example, Calvin H. French, “The Efficient College,” AAC Bulletin 2, no. 3 (1916): 60–85.
9. Ibid., 38.
11. The most notable of these cases was the dismissal of Edward Ross by Stanford University, whose benefactor Mrs. Leland Stanford objected to his views on immigrant labor. But others, such as Willard Fisher from Wesleyan, John Mecklin from Lafayette, and Scott Nearing from the University of Pennsylvania, typify the issues and their results. See chapter 1 in Cain, Establishing Academic Freedom.
13. AAC’s positions, which “were at once taken as a basis for discussion,” are outlined in “Report of the Commission on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure,” AAC Bulletin 11, no. 3 (1925): 179–82; quotation from p. 180.
14. The story of the joint work toward the 1940 Statement, as well as its subsequent adoption by others, is in Cain, Establishing Academic Freedom, 163–69. AAC’s early efforts with the AAUP are briefly addressed by AAC’s second Executive Director, Guy E. Snavely, in The Search for Excellence: Memoirs of a College Administrator (New York: Vantage Press, 1964), p. 127 and chapter 12.
15. “Members of the Association of American Colleges,” AAC Bulletin 33, no. 1 (1947): 263–79. Of the eight where the flagship was not a member, three included a smaller public institution from that state.
16. AAC began a Commission on Colleges and Post-War Problems in 1942.
26. Hawkins notes that, besides ACE, AAC was the only institutional association to include historically black colleges and universities among its membership, and that it was “special because of its inclusiveness.” He credits the 1948 debate as marking “an end to the AAC’s long indifference to racial exclusion in education.” Hawkins, Banding Together, 206, 182.
30. For AAC’s role in the creation of NAICU, see Curtis, Enhancing, 13–14; Bloland, Associations in Action, 63–7.
31. Personal communication with Jerry G. Gaff, AAC&U senior scholar, June 25, 2014. Gaff will explore the creation of NAICU within a consideration of faculty roles in AAC&U’s history in a forthcoming article for this centennial series.
Both the University of Pennsylvania’s founder, Benjamin Franklin, and the great American pragmatic philosopher John Dewey emphasized that education and the schooling system, more than economics, politics, or anything else, primarily determine the character of a society. As Franklin wrote in 1750, “nothing is of more importance to the public weal, than to form and train up youth in wisdom and virtue. Wise and good men are, in my opinion, the strength of a state: much more so than riches or arms, which, under the management of Ignorance and Wickedness, often draw on destruction, instead of providing for the safety of a people.”

This belief that education—that what and how we teach and learn—shapes a society and its future was also an animating idea for Ernest Boyer. For him, education was the foundation of democracy itself:

We saw that if we hoped to build a democracy, we needed to have an education that was broad-based, and we determined it had to be universal. Every one of our Founding Fathers knew that if we wanted to move toward a government that was run by the people, they had to be enlightened. Surely, they have to work; surely, they have to be responsible as producers as well as consumers. But the larger purpose of education in this country is always driven by the fact that we need people to be civically engaged, intellectually and educationally well informed, or else we were opening the doors to tyranny.

Franklin’s proposal to establish a college in Philadelphia was, as I will discuss momentarily, unique among colonial colleges because of its focus on education for service rooted in the values of the Enlightenment, not religion. He also understood, however, that colleges were institutions that had other impacts; he appealed for support for his proposal by also emphasizing the significant economic benefits it would bring to the city. Using current terminology, Franklin, in effect, saw the college functioning as an anchor institution for Philadelphia.

For Boyer, colleges and universities also had broad societal functions, with “more intellectual resources than any other institution in our culture.” Boyer, in effect, would agree with Harvard’s President Derek Bok when he identified “the
modern university as the central institution in post-industrial society.\textsuperscript{4}

The beliefs that education and schooling significantly determine the character of a society and that higher education has broad societal impacts, including helping to shape the rest of the schooling system, lead logically to the core idea that unites Franklin’s and Boyer’s work and serves as the basis of their revolutionary vision for higher education. That core idea, simply put, is this: The primary purpose of higher education is service to society for the progressive betterment of the human condition. And to realize that purpose, Franklin in 1749 and Boyer 245 years later, in 1994, each wrote, in effect, proposals to create the New American College.

In 1749, Benjamin Franklin drafted his Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, which described the purposes and curriculum of the “Academy of Philadelphia,” later renamed the University of Pennsylvania, “as consisting in an Inclination join’d with an Ability to serve Mankind, one’s Country, Friends and Family.”\textsuperscript{5} While Franklin founded Penn as an Enlightenment-inspired secular institution to educate students in a variety of fields, the other colonial colleges were largely created to educate ministers and religiously orthodox men capable of creating good communities built on religious denominational principles. Deliberately unaffiliated with any religious denomination, and therefore radically differing from existing institutions of higher education in America and Europe, the College of Philadelphia was dedicated to the advancement of scientific learning and knowledge for the benefit of humanity.

While Boyer, a 1948 graduate of Messiah Bible College (now Messiah College), an evangelical Christian college, had a radically different religious orientation from the Deist Franklin, he could not have agreed more with Franklin’s view that American higher education had a social mission. And for Boyer, that mission specifically was realizing America’s founding democratic purpose. In 1994, in his extraordinarily influential “Creating the New American College,” he wrote, “Higher education and the larger purposes of American society have been—from the very first—inextricably intertwined.”\textsuperscript{6}

The history of American higher education strongly supports Boyer’s claim.
“the boundaries of the university . . . the boundaries of the state.” When asked what accounted for the great progressive reforms that spread across the Midwest in the first two decades of the twentieth century, McCarthy replied, a union of “soil and seminar.” McCarthy’s answer captures the essence of the Wisconsin Idea: focusing academic resources on improving the life of the farmer and the lives of citizens across the entire state.

The private urban research universities founded in the late nineteenth century also made service to community and society a central goal. In 1876, Daniel Coit Gilman in his inaugural address as the first president of Johns Hopkins, the first modern research university in the United States, expressed the hope that universities should “make for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospitals, less fraud in business, less folly in politics.” Following Gilman’s lead, the abiding belief in the democratic purposes of the American research university echoed throughout higher education at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1899, the University of Chicago’s first president, William Rainey Harper, characterized the university as the “prophet of democracy” and its “to-be-expected deliverer.” And in 1908, Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, proclaimed: “At bottom most of the American institutions of higher education are filled with the democratic spirit of serviceableness. Teachers and students alike are profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community.”

University presidents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the so-called Progressive Era, worked to develop the American research university into a major national institution capable of meeting the needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society. Imbued with boundless optimism and a belief that knowledge could change the world for the better, these captains of erudition envisioned universities as leading the way toward a more effective, humane, and democratic society for Americans in general and residents of the city in particular. Progressive academics also viewed the city as their arena for study and action. Practicing what today would be called engaged scholarship, they seized the opportunity to advance knowledge, teaching, and learning by working to improve the quality of life in American cities experiencing the traumatic effects of industrialization, immigration, and large-scale urbanization.

As the statements from Presidents Gilman and Harper in particular indicate, the idea that universities have the potential to be powerful resources for solving highly complex urban and metropolitan problems is longstanding. Engaged scholarship largely vanished, however, from the academy after 1918. World War I was the catalyst for a full-scale retreat from action-oriented, reformist social science. The brutality and horror of that conflict ended the buoyant optimism and faith in human progress and societal improvement that had marked the Progressive Era.

Indeed, despair led many social scientists to turn to a narrow scientistic approach. “Sociology as a science is not interested in making the world a better place in which to live, in encouraging beliefs, in spreading information, in dispensing news, in setting forth impressions of life, in leading the multitudes or in guiding the ship of state,” University of Chicago sociologist William F. Ogburn declared in his 1929 presidential...
address to the American Sociological Society. “Science is interested directly in one thing only, to wit, discovering new knowledge.”

What the sociologist Robert Nisbet termed a “Seventy-Five-Years War” helped keep American institutions of higher education focused on global, as opposed to local, concerns. In 1997, my colleague Lee Benson put it this way: “In the decades after World Wars I and II, American higher education . . . increasingly concentrated on essentially scholastic, inside-the-Academy problems and conflicts rather than on the very hard, very complex problems involved in helping American society realize the democratic promise of American life for all Americans. As a result, they increasingly abandoned the public mission and societal engagement that had powerfully, productively inspired and energized them during their pre-World War I formative period of great intellectual growth and development.”

The 1960s did see something of a return of higher education institutions working with their neighbors. From 1965 to 1968, the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, under the leadership of John Gardner, provided hundreds of millions of dollars to universities in order to develop projects and programs with their cities and communities. During the same period and into the 1970s, the Ford Foundation made a similar investment in higher education. Unfortunately, these funds did not produce the desired result. Treating urban and metropolitan engagement as a mere add-on, colleges and universities applied little, if any, effort to changing their core teaching and research functions. They resisted making the internal changes needed to work effectively with government, foundations, and other organizations and contribute to the improvement of their local communities and cities.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989 had a profound impact on creating a climate that encouraged democratic community engagement. The emergence of a new type of college and university is perhaps most credibly explained, however, as a response to the poverty, physical deterioration, crime and violence of the American city. Moreover, the problems of the American city were often visible in the very shadows of higher education institutions, affecting these institutions’ ability to recruit and retain faculty and students. After the Cold War ended, the situation became increasingly obvious (and obviously immoral) and troubling. In short, after 1989 the combination of external pressure and enlightened self-interest spurred an increasing number of American higher education institutions to begin to engage democratically with their local communities.

Since that time, something like a higher education democratic civic and community engagement movement has developed across the United States and around the world to better educate students for democratic citizenship and to improve schooling and the quality of life. Service learning, community-based participatory research, volunteer projects, and institutional investment and support are some of the means that have been used to create mutually beneficial partnerships designed to make a profound difference in the community and on the campus.

Over the past two and a half decades, the academic benefits of community engagement have also been illustrated in practice—and the intellectual case for engagement effectively made by leading scholars and educators, including Ernest Boyer, John Gardner, Derek Bok, and the University of Pennsylvania’s president, Amy Gutmann. That case can be briefly summarized as follows: When institutions of higher education give very high priority to actively solving real-world problems in and with their communities, a much greater likelihood exists that they will significantly advance learning, research, teaching, and service and thereby simultaneously reduce barriers to the development of mutually beneficial, higher education–community partnerships. More specifically, by focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities (such as poverty, poor schooling, inadequate healthcare), institutions of higher education will generate knowledge that is both nationally and globally significant and be better able to realize their primary mission of contributing to a healthy, democratic society.

The burden of tradition and other obstacles to change

In recent years, colleges and universities have increasingly been called on to do the right thing and engage with their communities, but in order for them to engage effectively, they
must overcome the burden of tradition. In his attempt to create a new, innovative college in and for the New World of America, Franklin was keenly aware of that burden.

Soon after the College of Philadelphia began operation in 1751, Franklin left Philadelphia on a variety of missions that essentially kept him in Europe for more than thirty years. During his long absence, the men who controlled and conducted the college were strongly committed, both in theory and in practice, to the traditional classical model. Nothing resembling Franklin’s proposed radical reformation of higher education, therefore, was ever put into practice in Philadelphia. Shortly before he died in 1790, Franklin angrily denounced the trustees of what by then had become the University of Pennsylvania for their conservative and destructive approach. Franklin explained their intellectual inertia by asserting that “there is in mankind an unaccountable prejudice in favor of ancient Customs and Habitudes, which inclines to a Continuance of them after the Circumstances which formerly made them useful, cease to exist.” A “prejudice in favor of ancient Customs and Habitudes,” in my judgment, continues to function as a primary obstacle to the radical transformation of colleges and universities into engaged, democratic, civic institutions.

Although a primary obstacle, it is by no means the only one. In my judgment, the forces of commercialism and commodification, misplaced nostalgia for “Ivory Towerish,” traditionally elitist, traditional liberal arts, and intellectual and institutional fragmentation...
also function as significant obstacles to needed change. Let me briefly explain.

Education for profit, not virtue; students as consumers, not producers of knowledge; academics as individual superstars, not members of a community of scholars—all of these are examples of the commercialization of higher education. Perhaps the most important consequence of the commercialization of higher education is the devastating impact it has on the values and ambitions of college students. When higher education institutions openly and increasingly pursue commercialization, their behavior legitimizes and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest by students and contributes to the widespread sense that they are in college exclusively to gain career-related skills and credentials. Student idealism and civic engagement are also strongly diminished when students see their universities abandon academic values and scholarly pursuits to function openly and enthusiastically as competitive, profit-making corporations. Commercialism also powerfully contributes to higher education being seen as a private benefit, instead of a public good.

In part as a response to galloping commercialism, some have made the case for a preservation of, or return to, traditional liberal arts education—an essentialist approach with roots in Plato’s antidemocratic, elitist theory of education. Boyer’s call for creating the New American College was, to a significant extent, also a call for what Carol Geary Schneider has termed a new “liberal art” involving “integrative learning—focused around big problems and new connections between the academy and society.”¹⁵ That concept is effectively expressed in the New American Colleges and Universities’ description of the ideas celebrated by the Boyer Award: “Boyer’s quest for a common learning, connecting theory to practice and thought to action, in and out of the classroom, continues to inspire the New American Colleges and Universities, as well as other colleges and universities throughout the country, to creatively integrate liberal and professional studies with community engagement.”¹⁶

A 1982 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report titled The University and the Community claimed, “Communities have problems, universities have departments.”¹⁷ Beyond being a criticism of universities, that statement neatly indicates another major reason why colleges and universities have not contributed as they should. Quite simply, their

The benefits of a local community focus for college and university civic engagement programs are manifold

unintegrated, fragmented, internally conflictual structure and organization impede understanding and development of solutions to highly complex human and societal problems. Colleges and universities need to significantly decrease the fragmentation of disciplines, overspecialization, and division between and among the arts and sciences and the professions, since these departmental and disciplinary divisions have increased the isolation of higher education from society itself.

So what is to be done to reduce the negative effects of the dead hand of dysfunctional traditions, as well as commercialism and commodification, “Ivory Tower nostalgia,” and intellectual and institutional fragmentation? To help answer that question, I turn to one of John Dewey’s most significant propositions: “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.”¹⁸ Democracy, Dewey emphasized, has to be built on face-to-face interactions in which human beings work together cooperatively to solve the ongoing problems of life. In effect, I am updating Dewey and advocating the following proposition: Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the engaged neighborly college or university and its local community partners.

The benefits of a local community focus for college and university civic engagement programs are manifold. Ongoing, continuous interaction is facilitated through work in an easily accessible location. Relationships of trust, so essential for effective partnerships and effective learning, are also built through day-to-day work on problems and issues of mutual concern. In addition, the local community provides a convenient setting in which a number of service-learning courses, community-based research courses, and related courses in different disciplines can
work together on a complex problem to produce substantive results. Work in a university’s local community, since it facilitates interaction across schools and disciplines, can also create interdisciplinary learning opportunities. And finally, the local community is a democratic real-world learning site in which community members and academics can pragmatically determine whether the work is making a real difference, and whether both the neighborhood and the higher education institution are better as a result of common efforts. Indeed, I would contend that a focus on local engagement is an extraordinarily promising strategy for realizing institutional mission and purpose. Or as elegantly expressed by Paul Pribbenow, president of Augsburg College, the “intersections of vocation and location” provide wonderful opportunities for both the institution and the community.19

In his 1749 proposal to establish a college, Franklin called for local engagement, making the extraordinarily radical suggestion for the times that students visit and learn from “neighbouring Plantations of the best Farmers.”20 And Boyer, of course, placed local community engagement at the very center of his 1994 proposal to create a New American College. In a paragraph focused on the responsibility of higher education to help solve significant urban problems (in which he kindly quotes me), Boyer wrote: “And what about our cities? Urban America is where the nation’s fabric is now experiencing its most serious strain. Violence, unemployment, poverty, poor housing, and pollution often occur at the very doorsteps of some of our most distinguished colleges and universities. How can the nation’s campuses stay disengaged? Ira Harkavy . . . warns that ‘universities cannot afford to remain shores of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty at the edge of island seas of squalor, violence, and despair.’”21

**University-community-school partnerships**

To support the Franklin-Boyer position, I turn to the example I know best: Penn’s work with West Philadelphia, a largely disadvantaged area of approximately two hundred thousand people. Since 1985, the university has increasingly engaged in comprehensive and mutually beneficial university-community-school partnerships. Coordinated by the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships, more than two hundred Academically-Based Community Service (ABCS) courses (Penn’s approach to service learning) have been developed. ABCS courses integrate research, teaching, learning, and service around action-oriented, community problem solving. Penn students work on improving local schools, spurring economic development on a neighborhood scale, and building strong community organizations. At the same time, they reflect on their service experience and its larger implications (e.g., why poverty, racism, and crime exist). In 2013–14, approximately 1,800 Penn students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) and more than fifty faculty members (from twenty-six departments across nine of Penn’s twelve schools) were engaged in West Philadelphia through sixty-five ABCS courses. (This represents significant growth since 1992, when three faculty members taught four ABCS courses to approximately one hundred students.)

The Netter Center has also been working for over twenty years on the idea of university-assisted community schools. Community schools bring together multiple organizations and their resources to educate, activate, and serve not just students but all members of the community in which the school is located.

**Perhaps the most important consequence of the commercialization of higher education is the devastating impact it has on the values and ambitions of college students**

This idea essentially extends and updates a theory John Dewey developed from his close association with Jane Addams and other Hull House settlement workers struggling to improve the quality of life for the immigrant residents of the poverty-stricken Chicago neighborhood in which Hull House was located. Recognizing that although there were very few settlement houses, there were very many public schools, Jane Addams in Chicago and Lillian Wald in New York City, as well as other socially concerned feminist settlement house workers, pioneered the transfer of social, health, cultural, and recreational services to public schools of major US cities at the turn of the twentieth century.

Inspired by their innovative ideas and impressed by their practical community activities, John Dewey in 1902 presented a highly influential and prophetic address, “The School
as Social Centre,” in which he described his theory that the neighborhood school can function as the core neighborhood institution—the one that provides comprehensive services, galvanizes other community institutions and groups, and helps solve the myriad problems communities confront in a rapidly changing world. Dewey recognized that if the neighborhood school were to function as a genuine community center, it would require additional human resources and support. But to my knowledge, he never identified universities as a key source of broadly based, sustained, comprehensive support for community schools. My colleagues and I emphasize “university-assisted” because we have become convinced that universities are uniquely well positioned to provide strategic, comprehensive, and sustained support for community schools.

It is important to emphasize that the university-assisted community schools now being developed at Penn and elsewhere have a long way to go before they can fully mobilize the powerful, untapped resources of their own institutions and of their communities, including those found among individual neighbors and in local institutions (such as businesses, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, and hospitals). This will require, among other things, more effective coordination of governmental and nonprofit funding streams and services. How to conceive that profound organizational change, let alone bring it about, poses extraordinarily complex intellectual and social challenges.

With its focus on how to make connections between and among various organizations and individuals, it is a problem tailor-made for the New American College called for by Boyer. At its core, the New American College is, as Boyer wrote, “a connected institution . . . committed to improving, in a very intentional way, the human condition.” Developing and connecting knowledge to the world for human betterment was, as I have discussed, also central to Franklin.

“Only connect!” the powerful evocative epigraph to E. M. Foster’s classic novel Howard’s
End captures the essence of Franklin and Boyer's strategy for change. "The scholarship of engagement," Boyer wrote, "means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities... Campuses would be viewed by both students and professors not only as isolated islands, but as staging grounds for action."23

By focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities, institutions of higher learning will be better able to reduce the "ancient customs and habits" impeding college and university community engagement, advance research, teaching, learning, and service, and they will be better able to realize Benjamin Franklin and Ernest Boyer's revolutionary vision for higher education of active engagement and service. I am convinced that if American higher education realizes that revolutionary vision, American society will be able to realize the revolutionary founding democratic promise of America for each and every American.

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NOTES
22. Ibid.
Leadership Practices for Interfaith Excellence in Higher Education

THE RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS of higher education are changing rapidly. College campuses have become prime sites for conflicts involving religious identity. Many such stories have made national news—polarizing debates about Israel/Palestine, frustration by campus religious groups regarding “all comers” policies, the emergence of a strand of atheism that is overtly hostile to religion. Furthermore, the religious demographics of student bodies across the country have shifted drastically, even at religiously affiliated schools. Take Augsburg College as an example. Founded as the first higher education institution of what would become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg is today reflective of the broad diversity of its home city of Minneapolis. President Paul Pribbenow has observed that Augsburg College is located in the most diverse zip code between Chicago and Los Angeles. The student body includes members of the local Somali Muslim, Hmong, and Native American communities; students of color constitute 30 percent of the student body, and Lutherans only 20 percent.

Knowing what leads to excellent campus-based interfaith engagement is important for ensuring that American colleges and universities deliver on the enduring goals of liberal education...
Higher education is well equipped to take on this charge. America’s college campuses have long set the educational and civic agenda for the nation on issues such as multiculturalism, volunteerism, and environmentalism. College campuses are social laboratories where a range of interfaith strategies can be tested; faculty can help create the necessary knowledge base to support and guide interfaith engagement, and higher education can make it a priority to nurture interfaith leaders, much as it has done with multicultural leaders. Of course, many college campuses have been doing some version of this on an ad hoc basis for many years. Chaplains and deans of religious life have worked to accommodate the spiritual needs of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, humanist, and other minority traditions. Students have launched interfaith clubs and councils. Courses focusing on interactions between different religious identities have emerged in a variety of departments, and faculty have written scholarly works on the subject.

As this type of activity grows, it is useful to ask what strategies, or combinations of strategies, are most effective in interfaith work. In other words, what does excellence look like when it comes to the engagement of religious diversity on a college or university campus? Is it possible to identify best practices, analogous to the “LEAP high-impact practices” identified by AAC&U, that could be used as benchmarks or to orient future strategic planning in this area? Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a Chicago-based nonprofit organization, began working with colleges and universities on interfaith programs after the events of September 11, 2001. Since then, the organization has partnered with over four hundred institutions on interfaith programming, hosted over three hundred campus delegations at interfaith leadership institutes, provided speakers to give keynote addresses on one hundred campuses, and partnered with twenty-five campuses on in-depth engagement consultations. In sifting through this experience in the field, it is possible to discern patterns of effectiveness. Notwithstanding the particularities of individual institutional contexts, there are clear commonalities among the most successful campus efforts—what we have come to call the “leadership practices for interfaith excellence in higher education.”

It is worth noting that the articulation of these practices is not the result of a rigorous study of interfaith work in higher education. Such a study is actually being launched (see below), but the results are several years away. Instead, compiled here are the insights of three experienced practitioners who work at Interfaith Youth Core and have partnered with practitioners on campuses across the country. Consequently, the best way to approach the practices described below is as a set of hypotheses to be tested and analyzed.

**Leadership practices for interfaith excellence**

Presented below are brief synopses of nine “leadership practices” that have emerged from Interfaith Youth Core’s experience, along with a brief example of how each has been embedded within a campus in the IFYC network. Since the practices are intentionally aspirational, the examples chosen do not necessarily represent the highest form of the practice; rather, they are meant to be illustrative.

The practices overlap to varying degrees, but two themes are clear across all nine. First, each of these practices is most effective when pursued with a commitment to both breadth (large percentages of the campus community having at least minimal exposure) and depth (select groups of the community having the opportunity to explore these issues in detail). Second, none of the practices is a “stand-alone”; they are best pursued in some combination. Campuses ought to start where they have existing strengths and positive energy, and grow from there.

1. **Establishing links to institutional identity and mission.** To promote effective campus engagement with religious diversity, it is essential that the priority of interfaith cooperation be directly linked to the institution’s mission, values, and identity. A campus might consider how the institution’s religious or historical identity makes salient the need for interfaith cooperation. Students should know that part of the institution’s mission is to graduate global and civic leaders who...
have had experience with interfaith cooperation and have developed interfaith literacy.

For example, the President’s Interfaith Advisory Council at Concordia College has crafted a Lutheran identity statement, which says that “Concordia College practices interfaith cooperation because of, not in spite of, its Lutheran identity.

2. Developing a campus-wide strategy. An individual college or university’s plan for promoting interfaith engagement flows from its mission and guides the campus as it tries to live into its vision across the curriculum and cocurriculum. The creation of internal guiding documents—vision statements, strategic plans, statements of campus-wide learning goals—is a key way to demonstrate that interfaith cooperation is an institutional priority. A campus might, for example, make it a goal to increase the religious diversity of the student body, convene a cross-campus interfaith cooperation committee made up of a range of stakeholders, or identify and measure campus-wide learning outcomes for all students. No matter the goal, the strategic integration of the curricular and the cocurricular fosters educational experiences that are likely to have a significant impact on students.

Elon University’s intentional, layered plan for multi-faith engagement is exemplary in this regard. Embedded within the first theme of “The Elon Commitment,” the university’s strategic plan, is a commitment to “build a multi-faith center and promote interfaith dialogue.” With respect to the creation of a center, the planning process was led by a special “religious houses and multi-faith center” committee. Additionally, a team of staff and faculty recently completed a new strategic plan specifically to guide the work of the center and the broader campus initiative. As a result, Elon has a clear roadmap for achieving its goals related to multi-faith engagement.

3. Creating a public identity. A campus’s public interfaith identity complements its internal strategy. External communications and marketing materials can be used to highlight interfaith initiatives, and they should represent people from an array of religious backgrounds. In addition, high-profile community events focused on interfaith cooperation and public relations opportunities, such as the invitation of religiously diverse convocation speakers and the award of honorary degrees to religiously diverse recipients, convey the campus’s priorities to external constituents.

Loyola University Chicago’s recent “a home for all faiths” marketing campaign exemplifies this practice. The university used eye-catching advertisements—displayed on busses and kiosks across the city—to express its commitment to a religiously diverse student body, thereby encouraging students from many backgrounds to apply for admission. The slogan “a home for all faiths” appeared in large print across the city, letting locals know that Loyola might be a place for them, whether they’re Catholic or not. This very public statement about Loyola’s commitment to inclusion helps the university sustain its inclusive and religiously diverse campus community.

4. Respecting and accommodating diverse religious identities. The foundation for interfaith programming rests on both respect for the religious (or nonreligious) identity of all members of the community and reasonable accommodations related to how individuals live out their traditions in daily life. To this end, it is important that campus policies be instituted that address issues of religious accommodation, that strides be taken to communicate these policies, and that procedures be established by which new requests can be made and addressed. Many campuses have recognized the need to build multiple or multipurpose prayer spaces to accommodate the increasing diversity of religious expression, as well as to establish dining options that meet students’ dietary needs.

Utah Valley University is a public institution with more than thirty thousand students, 80 percent of whom are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The university recently opened an interfaith reflection center in the heart of its campus. Faculty and staff had seen students—mostly Muslim students—praying in bathrooms and other corners of the campus, and knew a welcoming
Higher education movements lack “legs” if students are not committed or invested

Public space was necessary if they were to be honest about meeting the needs of their student body. Therefore, Utah Valley’s president, himself a member of the LDS church, approved a new wellness building on the condition that it include a space that would be open to students of all faith traditions. This interfaith reflection center demonstrates the university’s commitment to respecting and accommodating the full array of students’ religious identities.

5. Making interfaith cooperation an academic priority. Increasingly, scholars from a variety of disciplines are recognizing the importance of interfaith cooperation as a subject of academic research, analysis, and instruction. Many colleges and universities have launched courses and course sequences in interfaith studies that are designed to train students to examine the multiple dimensions of interactions among individuals and groups who orient around religion differently and the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society, and global politics. In addition to supporting scholarly pursuits, the investment of institutional resources in faculty development—focused on the pedagogy of this nascent field as well as responding to the dynamics of a religiously diverse classroom—is an important component of this practice.

Dominican University exemplifies a broad and deep approach to this leadership practice. Since 2011, Dominican has required all first-year and sophomore students to read an interfaith-themed text in their liberal arts and sciences seminars. This means that texts presenting a variety of religious viewpoints—Living Buddha, Living Christ by Thich Nhat Hahn and Encountering God by Diana Eck—are read across disciplines and from multiple perspectives. In addition to these common seminar texts, faculty in the theology department are preparing to launch an interfaith studies minor. This multipronged approach ensures that Dominican students can access interfaith theory and concepts in multiple ways across the curriculum.

6. Building competence and capacity among staff and faculty members. Professional staff members and faculty do much to shape the campus climate and the student experience. Staff and faculty development opportunities, staff and faculty understanding of interfaith issues and religious diversity among the student body, and staff positions dedicated to interfaith cooperation—

all can contribute to a positive climate for people of diverse religious identities.

Berea College has been supporting interfaith student engagement and student leadership for many years. A desire to reach more students and make the commitment more sustainable led Berea to equip key staff people across student life. Student life personnel were asked to train resident assistants, student chaplains, service-learning leaders, and others in interfaith cooperation and how to engage religious diversity. In addition to providing structured workshops and training sessions, the approach helped the staff members involved to increase their fluency and comfort in engaging religious diversity and interfaith cooperation more broadly.

7. Encouraging student leadership. Higher education movements lack “legs” if students are not committed or invested, and young interfaith leaders do not emerge unless they have civic spaces within which to develop. Campus structures that support interfaith student leadership also contribute to effective student learning, promote program sustainability, and ensure that a variety of opportunities are available to students interested in interfaith leadership.

The interfaith scholars program at DePaul University exemplifies campus efforts to encourage interfaith student leadership. Scholars are chosen through a competitive application process and are representative of the student body in a number of ways, including in terms of religious diversity. Once selected, they are asked to develop their own interfaith leadership skills, build intentional relationships with one another, facilitate activities and programs for their peers, and reflect on their learning and growth. The scholars host regular dialogues and discussions that can engage hundreds of students.

8. Engaging in campus-community partnerships. Effective interfaith engagement requires practice, in addition to theoretical knowledge. Often, practice occurs beyond the boundaries of a campus in the form of service-learning experiences, internships, off-campus study, or other experiential education opportunities that engage students in interfaith civic engagement. These opportunities are most sustainable and effective when they draw on intentional and mutually beneficial relationships between the campus and local religious or civic organizations.

Elizabethtown College is attuned to this practice in all aspects of its cocurricular interfaith work. The college chaplains lead off-campus
visits to sacred spaces and faith-based spring break service trips, and provide guidance and advising to Elizabethtown’s service-focused “Better Together” interfaith student group. In addition, Elizabethtown students may be selected as undergraduate fellows in ethical leadership, a program that emphasizes interfaith leadership. The fellows focus on networking, integrating life and work, and reflecting on experiences such as internships and volunteer service. Through these efforts, Elizabethtown is leveraging community relationships in order to help students take their interfaith leadership into “real life.”

9. Assessing campus climates and interfaith initiatives. Interfaith cooperation is a relatively new phenomenon and, accordingly, intentional analysis and assessment are required to determine outcomes and goals, best practices, and efficacy. Campus climates and interfaith initiatives should be assessed regularly, and the findings should be used to guide ongoing improvement and strategic planning. Those involved in efforts to promote interfaith cooperation should never stop asking, “What are we trying to achieve, and how do we know whether what we are doing is having the intended effect?”

A rigorous scholarly assessment of interfaith effectiveness and experience is currently being launched. Developed by Matt Mayhew of New York University and Alyssa Rockenbach of North Carolina State University, the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is a five-year study of interfaith strategies in higher education. The initiative will include over 150 participating campuses—a broad cross-section of American higher education—and will survey students at three points in their college careers: at the start of the first year, after the first year, and at the end of the college experience. The purpose of the study is to discern the impact that campus programs and student experiences have on key interfaith outcomes, such as knowledge about different traditions and attitudes toward religiously diverse people. IDEALS will provide data about individual campuses, particular segments within higher education (large public universities in the Midwest, for example), and higher education as a whole.

Conclusion
As University of La Verne President Devorah Lieberman often remarks as she considers the growing interfaith work on her own campus, “This isn’t rocket science. It’s harder.” There is no silver bullet or single programmatic prescription that can guarantee interfaith excellence. Developing a campus culture of religious pluralism is painstaking, long-term work. Our hope is that the leadership practices described above will offer campus practitioners a useful framework for implementing their own interfaith goals and aspirations.

While the above list, as stated earlier, should be regarded as a set of hypotheses compiled by experienced practitioners, we would like to emphasize that there is a profound benefit for the broader society when colleges and universities embrace and apply these leadership practices as part of a liberal education. Campuses are positioned to serve as laboratories for interfaith cooperation, to make interfaith cooperation a broader civic priority, to nurture a generation of interfaith leaders, and to advance a knowledge base that can help society engage religious diversity. The Jacobsens’ articulate this hope well: “The future of the world depends on people of differing faiths developing the capacity to cooperate and work with each other, and American higher education can have a significant part in building that capacity.”

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NOTES
"I’m Not Going to Be Reading This Anymore"

Student Resistance to Problematic Texts

A key element of a liberal education is engagement with “classic” texts, texts that often present views in conflict with our commitment to diversity and inclusion. This article will ask, although not necessarily answer, a number of important questions: Do classic texts perpetuate long-refuted and harmful ideas? Can a racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise problematic text still be considered a “Great Book?” To what extent does the inclusion of a text in a syllabus imply endorsement by the professor? Should students have the right to refuse to engage with texts they find offensive? How should professors address student resistance?

When students say “No”

When University of Illinois at Chicago English professor Lennard J. Davis assigned Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in a graduate seminar, one of his students handed him the book and said, “You keep it. I’m not going to be reading it anymore.” The student objected to the novella’s colonial-era portrayal of Africans. Davis himself termed it “a racist classic,” which is perhaps a contradiction in terms. The student refused to read the text (actually re-read, since she had encountered it multiple times in her academic career), and Davis was forced to rethink his syllabus.

More recently, Timothy McNair, a graduate student in Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music refused to sing Howard Hanson’s “Song of Democracy” (1957) in a university concert, a requirement in a chorale course taught by Donald Nally. The assigned song contained lyrics based on the poetry of Walt Whitman. McNair did not object to the actual lyrics, but rather other statements by Whitman, such as the poet’s prediction that, “The nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated.” When McNair emailed Nally to say that he would not sing the song, Nally informed him that he could not pass without doing so. McNair stopped attending class and ultimately received a failing grade.

McNair filed a complaint with the local chapter of the NAACP. Dean Toni-Marie Montgomery responded, “The expectation of Northwestern University and the Bienen School of Music is that our students complete the work assigned to them by their professors.” In McNair’s view, the problem was the lack of discussion about the song’s problematic context. He claimed that he would have performed the song if there had been “an honest discussion” about Whitman’s views. The controversy has divided both students and faculty at Northwestern and beyond.

In another case, Christina Axson-Flynn, a theater student at the University of Utah, refused to read from scripts containing profanity, on the grounds that swearing went against her Mormon faith. When her professors insisted that she read her parts as written, she dropped out of the program. She argued that this requirement by a state institution violated her First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and free exercise of religion. According to her attorney, University of Minnesota law professor Michael Paulsen, public universities “cannot, as a requirement to curriculum, require students to utter words or engage in acts that violate their most deeply held religious principles.”

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Although I am not suggesting that a student’s resistance to a text always merits an accommodation by the professor, the professor should certainly take resistance seriously and respond in a respectful manner.

These cases present different issues, but each one turns on the student’s subjective feelings of offense. In the first case, the professor took those feelings seriously, while the faculty and administration in the other two cases were more dismissive; this explains why the students in those cases felt the need to lodge external complaints against their institutions. Although I am not suggesting that a student’s resistance to a text always merits an accommodation by the professor, the professor should certainly take resistance seriously and respond in a respectful manner.

**The value and danger of problematic texts**

*Heart of Darkness*, the book at issue in Davis’ class, is a perfect illustration of these competing assumptions at work. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe famously skewered this book in a 1975 lecture entitled “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness.*” Achebe argues that Conrad’s Africa is “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. Achebe then goes through the physical descriptions of Africans in the novel and concludes that black people horrify Conrad. This horror, in Achebe’s view, does not arise because of the dissimilarities between the races (though Conrad takes great pains to point them out), but rather the similarities, which make the kinship between Africans and Europeans clear.

Achebe’s case against *Heart of Darkness* reads like a criminal indictment. He digs deeply into the text to find patterns and exceptions, wrestling with Conrad’s famously-opaque language. By the end of the address, Achebe’s verdict is clear: “Conrad was a bloody racist.” He later edited out that mild profanity from the published version, but it now stands as the most famous line ever produced by the prolific novelist, poet, and critic.

There is some controversy among literary scholars about Achebe’s conclusion, but not the rigorous textual analysis he uses to reach it. In fact, Achebe’s skillful explication undermines his case to a certain extent. *Heart of Darkness* is a complex and challenging text, open to multiple interpretations. I happen to agree that Conrad was a “bloody racist,” but he was also a brilliant writer, and *Heart of Darkness* is a strident denunciation of European imperialism. In indicting Conrad, Achebe has to work with the man’s brilliance as well as his bigotry, neither of which is self-evident in a cursory reading of the novella. Achebe serves as a perfect model for how to engage critically with a challenging text. If we expunge Conrad from our syllabi, we deny our students the opportunity to follow Achebe’s lead.

In my Disability and the Law course I use a problematic text, the 1927 Supreme Court decision *Buck v. Bell.* That opinion was written by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., one of the most respected jurists in the Court’s history. Writing for the majority, Holmes voted to uphold a Virginia statute that allowed for the forced sterilization of “mental defectives.” Carrie Buck, who had given birth after being raped by a member of her foster family, would not be allowed to bear any more children. In Holmes’ famous words, “three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

I do not assign *Buck v. Bell* because it is a great work of legal and moral reasoning, for it clearly is not. Indeed, the decision caused considerable embarrassment for American prosecutors when defendants at the Nuremburg trials cited it as a legal precedent justifying Nazi eugenics practices. But the opinion does have pedagogical value. Ugly ideas exist in the real world, and we do our students no favors by pretending otherwise. Moreover, the decision demonstrates that an otherwise thoughtful intellectual like Holmes is capable of seriously flawed thinking.

*Buck v. Bell* always strikes a nerve with my students. They regularly conduct unassigned outside research to learn more about the tragic
life of Carrie Buck and the historical context surrounding her case. This gives them the ability to attack Holmes’s opinion on a number of fronts: morally, legally, scientifically, and factually. This case demonstrates that the best way to learn about justice is to study injustice.

A liberal education should prepare students to engage in what Holmes called the “free trade in ideas” within “the competition of the marketplace.” This is vital to a functioning democracy. By engaging in intellectual warfare with the likes of Joseph Conrad and Oliver Wendell Holmes in our classrooms, our students will be well equipped to advance their universities’ missions when they get out into the real world.

Best practices for engaging with problematic texts

The first thing I do when assigning a text—any text, whether problematic or not—is to explain why I have assigned it. This is a basic constructivist pedagogical technique that provides a framework for students to engage with that text. It also gives me a chance to offer a frank assessment of the text’s relative worth in comparison to others I chose not to assign. This makes it clear that I am not necessarily endorsing the ideas in a text and encourages students to voice their own objections to those ideas.

Looking back at the examples I cited at the beginning, Davis seems to have followed this strategy when he assigned *Heart of Darkness*. Axson-Flynn’s professors appear to have explained their reasoning for asking her to read plays containing profanity, but only after she objected. And according to McNair, Nally never explained why he asked students to sing “Song of Democracy” instead of something else.

In addition to justifying the inclusion of a text, professors can also assign a “counter-text,” one that expresses ideas in contrast to the problematic text. If I were assigning *Heart of Darkness*, I would also ask students to read Achebe’s criticism of it. *Disabled Rights* by Jacqueline Vauhyn Switzer, the primary textbook in my Disability and the Law course, contains an extended attack on *Buck v. Bell*. When assigning a counter-text, I am also sure to explain why. This is, of course, a common pedagogical technique of providing students with two competing points of view and asking them to reach their own conclusion. With a text like *Buck v. Bell*, though, I do not want it to appear as if I am presenting two points of view that hold equal validity; I make it clear that Switzer is right and Holmes is wrong.
A third strategy I use is to devise assignments that explicitly ask students to critique the problematic text. This makes it clear that I do not endorse the text. For example, as was relatively common in those days, Justice Pierce Butler dissented from the majority decision in *Buck v. Bell* but did not write an opinion explaining why. I therefore ask students in my Disability and the Law class to write that dissenting opinion. If I were assigning *Heart of Darkness*, I might ask the students to write a paper addressing the novella’s portrayal of Africans.

Now even after doing these things, students may still object to a text. What do we do then? If we allow students to opt out of texts that offend them, we run the risk of producing cloistered graduates who never gain the skills to confront differing viewpoints. On the other hand, forcing students to engage repeatedly with texts that demean them could be a form of harassment.

Student objections to a text provide an opportunity for professors to closely examine their course, as Davis did. If all my texts were written by dead white males, my syllabus needs updating. But if my assigned readings already express a wide range of experiences and viewpoints, I may, after an honest and open dialogue with the student, be right to stick with the assigned text, provided I offer ample opportunity for the student to articulate his or her problems with it.

After all this, a student may still refuse to engage with a text, leaving me to either assign an alternative or penalize the student. A number of factors would influence that decision, including the centrality of the text to the course’s topic and the student’s personal circumstances (e.g., a recent victim of sexual assault or a hate crime). If I finally conclude that the student must complete the assignment, we both will need to have the courage of our convictions. When Davis assigned *Heart of Darkness*, his objecting student was willing to accept a failing grade. The Bienen School of Music at Northwestern and the theater department at Utah both stood by their syllabi in the face of external complaints (although the administration at Utah eventually capitulated after a lengthy litigation process).

Many of the “classic” texts we assign in our classes express ideas that are at odds with contemporary morality. While I strongly favor adding previously ignored voices to our curricula, that does not mean we should discard every writer who expresses ideas we no longer find palatable. But neither should we swallow long-discredited ideas. Problematic texts provide an opportunity to engage in a mature dialogue with our students about how these texts fit into their education and to prepare them to participate as democratic citizens in the marketplace of ideas. It is our job to help our students solve these problematic texts.

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NOTES
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 790.
14. Ibid., 207.
17. The mission of my institution calls explicitly for students to take on these harmful ideas: “As a Sinsinawa Dominican-sponsored institution, Dominican University prepares students to pursue truth, to give compassionate service and to participate in the creation of a more just and humane world” (emphasis added).
How can a small liberal arts college remain true to its historic mission even as it innovates?

**Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they’ll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change. D’you understand?**

—Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

What are the enduring, value-added features of small, private liberal arts colleges? Certain distinctions come to mind: broad exposure to the disciplines, focused study in the majors, and close campus interactions—all enhanced by the residential experience. Liberal arts curricula give attention to contemporary skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration skills. Students graduate equipped with intellectual curiosity, civic mindedness, and interpersonal awareness—all fostered in an intimate and time-honored setting. Considering the myriad of other options, a choice for “small residential” is a choice for a well-rounded degree, dedicated faculty mentors, lifelong friendships, and tools for future success.

However, what is (and has historically been) the value of small, private residential liberal arts colleges is under question. The general public and, increasingly, policy makers perceive liberal arts curricula to be (among other things) out of date, too expensive, and unresponsive to the contours of the twenty-first century. Beyond the perception problem, there are pressures in the shifting nature of what students want from their undergraduate education and expectations for investment returns. To retain and strengthen their value, small liberal arts colleges need to find a way to “swim” in a challenging climate in which doing nothing could lead many of them to “sink.” While small privates offer what many other institutions of higher education cannot, namely a traditional liberal arts experience, they are caught in crosswinds that compel a renewal of purpose, a review of operations, and a redefinition of relationships if they are to thrive.

In the drive to find new ways forward, some traditional liberal arts colleges are moving away from their historic missions. Such change—including continuing educational and online programming—often results in mission creep, which undermines institutional identity and traditional campus roles and responsibilities. Yet, as the epigraph above implies, change can also be about preservation: *If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.* Authentic, thoughtful change conducted under strong leadership can begin to tackle a fundamental question, which is also the focus of this article: How can a small liberal arts college remain true to its historic mission even as it innovates?

Organizations like the Association of American Colleges and Universities and foundations such as Lumina, Mellon, and Teagle operate in two intersecting orbits: they actively commit to the enterprise of liberal education and they undertake work to improve it. Small privates are fortunate to have these external sources of promotion and accountability with respect to the promise of liberal education. Innovate, they counsel, but do it for the right reasons. Update, but remain true to a core purpose. Transform, but adhere to democratic principles. The challenge and opportunity for small privates is to do better—to undergo constant improvement—for our students, our institutions, and liberal arts education itself. The good news is that the small privates are not alone in this work or in the belief that the world needs the liberal arts mission now more than ever.

**Enabling conditions for change**

Some colleges have taken on the twenty-first century with gusto, while others are doing so at a steady, measured pace. Either way, small privates across the country—some by choice, many others by necessity—are engaging in a critical
review of their practices and undertaking creative renewal. Obviously, each change process is contextual; however, important lessons can be drawn from those campuses that have successfully repositioned themselves while remaining true to their historic missions.

Liberal arts colleges that are thriving today enjoy a combination of what here are termed “enabling conditions.” These conditions, or assets, allow the institution to read the external landscape effectively, initiate a “soul searching” process on campus, and build appropriate capacities for mission-centered responses. Following are five such enabling conditions.

1. A common understanding of challenges and opportunities. It is risky to sustain a blasé attitude toward the challenges facing the small privates today, not only because the threats are real, but because they suggest a landscape that is rich in opportunity for mission renewal. Successful campuses—and, critically, their faculties—have a shared understanding as regards the what, why, how, and when of the specific challenges and the promising mission-driven opportunities to strengthen the institutional mission.  

2. Visionary leadership with political capital to spend. New presidents and chief academic officers—especially those hired to bring integrity to an unstable environment—have more potential to harness community goodwill and offer convincing ideas than do the leaders who have been in office a good number of years and are forced to react to threats that arose during their tenure.  

3. A mission that explicitly or implicitly contains the seeds of change. This condition is as much about leaders seeing possibility in a longstanding mission as it is about the mission itself. Traditional liberal arts missions are indeed relevant to contemporary times; it takes creativity and determination to “find new meaning” within a longstanding institutional framework.  

4. A governing board willing to fund, or find funding for, change. Many boards—or the strategic planning task forces they mandate—ask constituencies to “imagine the possible”; however, the funding needed to pursue the big ideas that result often fails to materialize. Boards that budget for change are boards that govern for success.  

5. A creative and collaborative culture. Campuses that are unified rather than siloed are better able to handle the crosswinds that inform change and that require intra-campus discussions, integrated planning, and cohesive outcomes.

Considered together, the most fortunate small liberal arts college is the one with a wildly popular new president, a generous board, a culture of trust, a historic mission bristling with twenty-first-century meaning, and creative thought leaders. And if such an institution exists, who would not want to work there? Yet, of course, even for those campuses that enjoy most of the enabling conditions, change is not easy. Questions of resource allocation, faculty workload, and fear of the unknown punctuate all change efforts. Nonetheless, institutions that can respond in meaningful ways to societal change have most of the foundational elements for sustained success, which enables the continuity, rather than the creep, of their liberal arts missions.

**Cases of enabled change**

An example may help to illustrate these points. Hendrix College faced drastic cuts in scholarship monies previously channeled from the Arkansas governor’s office. Hendrix also faced competition for students from the budding honors college at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Seeing the writing on the wall, and working with the president, faculty and student leaders found a way to harness an existing strength at Hendrix—engaged learning—in order to build a new focus. What would become the Odyssey Program at Hendrix was born, supported by a three million dollar boost from the Hendrix board chair. This new signature component of the curriculum gives structure to, provides official transcript recognition for, and includes a reflection component to assess the college's experiential learning opportunities.

There are many things that contributed to Odyssey's, and Hendrix's, success. The faculty had already been through years of curricular change, including reforms of the general education and first-year programs. Yet, most faculty accepted (i.e., were willing to act on the fact) that, when hit with the loss of state scholarship monies and a state-sponsored competitor, Hendrix would be losing the pipeline of students on which it had relied. When combined with overall shrinking demographics, Hendrix would undoubtedly face an enrollment crisis.

The new president presented a convincing vision, which included a tuition hike and an enrollment strategy that marketed to out-of-state students. The goal from the beginning
was to build on what Hendrix was already doing and take it in new and richer directions. Seasoned faculty members provided leadership, communicated widely and frequently (with a diplomatic focus on colleagues who were resistant to the changes), and designed an incremental process for faculty voting that took it one step at a time. The cultural overlay was one of collaboration; according to a well-respected professor, Hendrix faculty “disagreed without being disagreeable,” began with what they could find consensus on, and kept the process student-centered. In the end, Hendrix did not tinker; it transformed. Hendrix adhered to a historic mission, even as it innovated.

Yet, as many leaders and faculty can attest, there is tremendous tension in the concept of mission-driven innovation. On the one hand, the relevance of the traditional liberal arts is perhaps greater today than at any other time in history. If the world is asking for critical thinkers, problem solvers, collaborators, and creative risk-takers, then a solid liberal arts education is the answer. It is right for the community of liberal arts colleges—including the faculty, who serve as the heart of the academic enterprise—to be buoyed by the belief and evidence that the historic mission to which they are devoted is indispensable to a twenty-first-century world.

On the other hand, there can be so much confidence in the historic mission that any change to it appears foolhardy. After all, why modify something that has endured the test of time and that the world needs now more than ever? But an overzealous defense of the status quo—not changing in order to keep things the same, to play on our opening quote—is full of risks and missed opportunities. The leadership challenge is to frame change as a strategy to preserve the core mission.

In this regard, Washington and Lee University, founded in 1749, offers a few lessons in finding value in historic purpose. Washington and Lee’s strategic plan identifies a vision for the future. But it also states that “there are abiding values of our institution that should not change ... as we pursue strategies for continuous improvement.” These values include the liberal arts model; the small, intimate setting of the campus; and solid study in the disciplines.

Yet, the intersecting nature of today’s world requires that students operate between disciplinary spaces in order to find solutions to the complex problems we face. At Washington and Lee, interdisciplinary innovation is an emerging feature of the academic program. For example, the Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability draws on multiple disciplines to move students toward both thought and action. The program’s goals go right to the heart of the university’s historic mission to prepare graduates for responsible leadership and service to others. The takeaway for small privates is that interdisciplinary innovation—that is, thematic programs that serve the common good—can occur because of, rather than despite, the historic mission. Washington and Lee is not only “changing to preserve”; it is innovating in order to create student change-agents.

**Backing it up**

Unfortunately, for most small privates, the enabling conditions for adaptation and improvement are stymied. Imagine a case in which enrollments continue to fall, resources become scarcer, the campus feels under siege, and leaders are forced to make “tough decisions” that further undermine trust and confidence. The campus may see signs of trouble and even a general need to “calibrate the liberal arts to the demands of a changing world” or “update programs for a shifting demographic.” However, because the conditions that would enable the process are lacking and the community is experiencing in deeply negative ways both the looming threats and the consequences of doing nothing, it becomes virtually impossible to move meaningful and sustained discussions forward.
In this scenario, a mistrustful faculty might fear the unknown and resist new ideas; administrators might venture out of the shared governance framework; a hierarchical culture might strengthen existing silos; or a board, lacking confidence, might fail to come up with needed funding. Any one of these is enough to weaken needed action. Because they exacerbate each other, these conditions tend to exist in multiples.

The factors that undermine enabling conditions are varied and entangled in a campus’s particular dynamics. These may include mistrust caused by distortions in shared governance, power struggles caused by leadership deficits, faculty “turf wars” tolerated by a culture of autonomy, or underfunded initiatives due to resource (or a culture of) scarcity. Adverse conditions exist on most campuses to one degree or another and affect how, why, and whether change unfolds.

Leadership and culture are two of the most important determinants of success. One particular challenge is a mindset—particularly among faculty—that, while supportive of the liberal arts mission, stalls the deep work needed to refresh the academic program. For a variety of reasons, including the previously mentioned “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” outlook, it is difficult for faculties to appreciate in toto today’s cause-and-effect challenges to and opportunities for small liberal arts colleges. This, in turn, makes it hard to grasp important developments in higher education, including the value of community-based learning or the blind spots derived from fixed disciplinary boundaries.

Again, it is not as if those of us at small liberal arts colleges completely ignore reality; we just do not go far enough in responding to it. We “do” globalization but can operate like self-contained entities, each responding in our own way to any particular challenge. We “get” the dangers of endowment spending and the expanding student debt bubble but can overlook the factors that perpetuate them. We “value” critical thinking as a learning outcome but do not adequately examine our own claims. When the time comes to “envision the future,” there is a lack of enabling conditions needed to advance corrective action. This helps explain why so many well-intentioned strategic plans at small liberal arts colleges fall short of their mark.

**Cultivating for change**

It is possible to move past inhibitory mindsets and obstructive habits and to approach adaptive change with focused creativity. However, the ground must be “cultivated for change.” This means that the first order of business is to take stock of which enabling conditions are lacking and then confront those gaps. After all, introducing strategic goals is not the same thing as having the capacities to achieve them. Imagine a backhoe that turns over the soil to make it ready for planting; liken this to developing the enabling conditions. Our campus environments must first be cultivated, or enabled, for change, so that ensuing discussions and decisions can take root and grow in the desired directions.

The “cultivation plan” is different from the strategic plan. While the latter defines direction, the former builds up to it. They can be produced at the same time and even integrated in the same document, but they should be seen as complementary, since diving into change without preparing for it will impair the intended results. Repositioning discussions and idea implementation inevitably rely on trusted leadership, collaborative culture, and mission-driven innovation—that is, the enabling conditions discussed above. To put and keep those conditions in place, prohibitive norms—for example, compartmentalized relationships and remote decision-making structures—will have to be identified and corrected. If left undisturbed, these norms will serve as the foundation for dysfunction, as the expected collaborative energies are spent on competing interests and agendas and leaders’ political capital is slowly exhausted. Confidence and goodwill must be cultivated if strategic adaptations are to have any chance of realizing their full and intended objectives. Of course, all of this is easier said than done, but what would the process of cultivation actually look like?

**Case study**

How does the inhibitory mindset play out on liberal arts campuses? How does an institution begin to cultivate for, or enable, change? It might be helpful to answer these questions by relying on a hypothetical case. Imagine that a fictitious College of Liberal Learning (CoLLL), having suffered drops in enrollment and endowment, is set to undergo a strategic planning process. The attendant task force, perhaps
informed by the market analysis of an outside consulting firm, will need to grapple with the question of how to reposition the college in an environment characterized by shrinking student demographics, new opportunities for educational partnerships, and emerging (more flexible and less costly) competitors. In responding to these changing dynamics and with a renewed commitment to its historic liberal arts mission, CoLL’s strategic plan envisions two broad goals: (1) adapt the liberal arts mission to the demands of a changing world, and (2) update programs and pedagogies that meet the expectations of today’s students.

The CoLL strategic planning task force favors these two goals, because they appear to be sensible steps that an institution relying on twenty-first-century dynamics would take seriously. Yet, when introduced to the community, CoLL faculty might react negatively to them, because—for starters—the goals imply that the academic program they built and govern is out of touch with students and with the times. Task force members have thus underestimated and not prepared for the extent to which these basic starting points might fuel defensive patterns and resistance posturing. When CoLL leaders open these seemingly reasonable goals up to a campus-wide discussion—without having also anticipated and planned for the inhibitory mindset—the process is, in effect, stymied from the outset.

Backing up, what might a cultivation plan look like for these circumstances? There are two important steps that need to be elaborated prior to or alongside the strategic planning process. These would be designed to complement, probe, and support the focus of the strategic plan. The idea is to bring to the surface obstacles—gaps in enabling conditions—that will bog down the process, recognize how and why they exist, and establish in their place facilitative features involving key constituencies.

Taking into account CoLL’s two strategic goals, the cultivation process would unfold in
two phases. Phase one identifies what, how, and why resistance to twenty-first-century repositioning and programmatic updating is likely to surface. This is a conscious look at what enabling conditions are lacking in a state of affairs the community might otherwise call “normal.” Phase two defuses those resistance features through the creation of new mechanisms designed to enable healthier discussions and creative approaches. This is a collective and challenging problem-solving process that both confronts and fills the identified gaps.

Phase one is designed to reveal norms, assumptions, and relationships that obstruct the ability to envision a better future. At CoLL, some of the inhibitions that might be revealed in the first phase of the cultivation plan include:

- fear that longstanding academic programs may not be viable and that faculty who have governed them for years may no longer have a solid place in the new curricular “updates”;
- skepticism about a “market analysis” that relies on business vocabulary and concepts and that seems to understate the historical value of CoLL’s institutional mission;
- misgivings about the CoLL governing board, which is made up of members who are in the private sector and do not necessarily understand the “historic liberal arts”;
- mistrust about “what got the college in this mess in the first place,” arising, for example, from dysfunctional shared governance relations between faculty and administration;
- discomfort with engaging in open conversations about shared challenges when the campus has traditionally rewarded operational “silos”—for example, a curriculum committee that is delinked from enrollment or funding operations;
- unease related to accommodating “the demands of a changing world,” when historically it was enough to simply offer a solid liberal arts education.

These revelations, which pose minimal risk when institutional finances are robust, become major detriments to any visioning process during times of financial vulnerability. They also indicate important things about the community; the fear, mistrust, and discord represent gaps in most of the enabling conditions identified above. If left unexamined, they will undermine the planning and implementation processes, especially if the college is relying on strategic goals to turn around revenue declines. It is far better to bring the inhibitions out into the open than to try to build a strategic plan on top of them and hope for the best. As a first step in the cultivation plan, and despite faculty discomforts, transparent discussions about job security, a twenty-first-century institutional mission, shared governance, the campus cultural landscape, financial realities, and other sources of fear and threats are in order.

Clearly, while it is abundantly useful to get these points on the table, it is not enough to stop there. The second phase of the cultivation plan is designed to reshape and strengthen the processes and mechanisms that define the campus culture and operations. The goal is to build supports for the strategic process, keep planning accountable and creative, and encourage and sustain the “buy in” of key constituents. It might be useful, for example, to offer faculty an opportunity to map themselves onto the envisioned new environment. The goal is for faculty to be less encumbered by hidden fears and more aware that their creativity is essential for the planning and implementation of strategic goals. As a seasoned faculty member at Hendrix explained, “professors have had to adapt to the reality that their own careers are intertwined with the college’s market position.” At CoLL, practices and mechanisms that might be established in response to the findings from the first phase include:

- a robust funding mechanism for curricular recalibration that incentivizes faculty to learn about and adopt programming and pedagogical innovation and that is both mission-sensitive and attuned to twenty-first-century opportunities;
- a nimble decision-making process for strategic initiatives that is accountable and enabled, participatory and data driven, forward looking and grounded in liberal education’s values;
- training for faculty and staff (with resources and release time provided) that enables them to play boundary-spanning roles between academic and nonacademic entities and to recommend ways to improve performance, cohesion, and collaboration;
- a process that encourages ongoing understanding of and interaction with external dynamics and entities, with the goal of sustaining CoLL’s responsiveness to twenty-first-century forces and expectations.

The second phase addresses effective decision making and resource availability, while providing accountable and reliable forums for discussion and planning. Residual as well as fresh misgivings
should have a place in the new processes that are created; building trust and setting basic priorities are keys to success. Phase two should result in enabling processes, structures, and relationships whose purposes are implicitly clear to the community.

For example, rejecting an oft-heard “bloated administration” argument, Hendrix faculty approved new positions to sustain the vision, including a director of the Odyssey Program, a director of civic engagement projects, and (later) a director of integrated advising. Fresh roles and responsibilities facilitate the best of what Hendrix envisioned for its Odyssey Program.

Washington and Lee faculty loosened disciplinary boundaries in order to develop an innovative program on poverty and human capacity that resonated with the university's historic mission and with the world at large. For institutions that can learn from these examples but that lack the same enabling conditions, the cultivation plan will help them "swim" as they address the challenges and invite the opportunities that emerge from the twenty-first-century context. Hendrix and Washington and Lee represent but two of the institutions that have taken on the challenge and used their enabling conditions to revive and sustain the value and validity of the historic liberal arts mission for twenty-first-century education. Small liberal arts colleges that can detect their own deficits will be equally empowered to effect fresh, mission-driven change.

Final thoughts
It is important to be intentional about cultivating for change. Reviewing operations and redefining direction require much from those who need to invest in the process with their time, energy, and resources. Constituencies are asked to acknowledge the role of a changing external environment, engage in calculated risks, and shift longstanding inhibitory mindsets. Success cannot be assumed, though change-agent strategic planners often overlook conditions on the ground that will ultimately determine the fate of their efforts. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

The enabling conditions can contribute greatly to the success of the historic liberal arts in the twenty-first century.

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

NOTES
1. The author expresses her thanks to Ken Ruscio, president of Washington and Lee University, for bringing this delightful novel to her attention and for pushing her to think more deeply about the philosophical questions related to mission-driven change.
2. The author would like to thank Provost Robert Entzminger, Professors Tom Goodwin, Jay Barth (director of civic engagement programs), and George Harper (associate director of the Odyssey Program), and Peg Falls-Corbitt (associate provost for engaged learning) for the generous sharing of their time in helping the author learn about the evolution of the Odyssey Program as a centerpiece of institutional change.

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There is no denying that colleges and universities are being dramatically transformed in ways that effectively dismantle endeavors that were once the bedrock of academic life. To point this out is not to wax nostalgic about “the good old days,” or to call for a return to outmoded models of liberal education, or to suggest that certain disciplines have a monopoly on liberal learning; after all, even philosophy can be taught in illiberal ways. Rather, it is simply to draw attention to the basic fact that the professionalization of undergraduate curricula—resulting, for example, in an explosion in BS degrees intended to prepare students for postgraduate programs—has supplanted almost entirely the more modest, but arguably more essential, purpose of higher education. Indeed, the very rhetoric now used to promote liberal education among students is leading predictably to a corruption of the values traditionally held to be fundamental to liberal education, values such as self-awareness, imagination, creativity, curiosity, perceptual acuity, and the like.

It is increasingly expected that every sphere of social life should be justified in terms of market efficiency. Accordingly, colleges and universities now “sell” their “product” with a promise to enhance the earning potential of their “customers,” and students view their time at college as, first and foremost, a way to land a “lucrative” job. The federal government is adding fuel to this fire by insisting that individual colleges and universities should be rated based on the return on investment of their customers. Producing investment bankers is good; producing social workers and teachers is not so good.

Where the intuitive obviousness of market wisdom is taken for granted, even “friends” of liberal education appear unprepared to defend the academic enterprise in anything but market terms. We have created a mutually reinforcing circle: economic sustainability requires that colleges and universities engage in advertisement that employs reductionist, market-centered characterizations of educational purpose, and students insist on the fulfillment of these promises.

The ongoing promulgation and general acceptance of this very narrow view of education is the result of a long and complex process. But where education is valued instrumentally as a means to gain employment or improve job performance, the importance of self-reflection and exposure to courses of study that challenge deep habits, customs, and traditions may be undermined. In lieu of any robust defense of moral and political transformation as a central purpose of undergraduate education, critics like David Horowitz, Lynne Cheney, and Stanley Fish have begun to pile on to the crisis by suggesting that any exposure to disturbing or challenging viewpoints amounts to indoctrination. Surely there have been and are instances of indoctrination taking place on college campuses. But there is an important distinction to be made between indoctrinating students, on the one hand, and stimulating students to make or (re)consider their moral, political, or existential commitments, on the other. Denying such a distinction means that the transformational dimension of education is purged nearly outright; education comes to be valued in a most horrifyingly “conservative” way as merely an accommodation or affirmation of existing moral, political, or existential identities.

We must find ways of resisting what should now be obvious, namely, the subordination of the traditional college or university mission—i.e., the provision of a form of education that promotes, among other things, the pursuit of truth, moral excellence, and justice—to the economic gamesmanship of university competitors, the petty politics of interdepartmental squabbles, economic competition between departmental peers (say, between adjuncts who are forced to compete for scarce class opportunities), and dogmatic stand offs between administrators and faculty. Lost in this
collective deterioration is our ability to pursue any genuinely defensible conception of education. But, even more, we are at risk of allowing “internal” competition to compromise the effectiveness with which we pursue even the stunted but now dominant conception of education as a preparation for job-market competition.

My View

Understanding the processes of commodification

Central to the much-needed self-criticism is an honest attempt to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the processes of commodification. In general, markets often appear to us as morally and ethically neutral ways of making tough collective decisions about how to distribute money, resources, and services. What could be more neutral, after all, than an approach that allows each individual—not the king, not the politburo—to decide what to buy and what to sell? Yet, we must consider that the very act of selling certain goods can alter, in morally problematic ways, the meaning, purpose, and valuation of the goods we buy. How can this point be made persuasively?

In What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), Michael Sandel asks us to consider things that cannot be bought, and he takes friendship to be an obvious example. Friendship is not a good that can be distributed via markets, since the very act of selling a friendship turns it into something other than friendship. Just imagine a friend saying, “I am your friend and will continue to offer you my friendship for a small fee.” This simple example shows that in order for friendship to be what it is, it cannot be bought and sold. Similarly, an impartial judicial decision would not retain its identity if it were to become an object of market exchange. There are de facto limits to markets, because there are some things that money cannot buy.

Other types of “goods” can be sold, though, and when they are, their meaning and purpose along with our ways of valuing them are changed. Consider the example given by Sandel of a Swedish community solicited by the Swedish government to store nuclear waste. In order to get a sense of how many in the community would be willing to have the waste stored in their neighborhood, the government conducted a survey. Fifty-one percent of the population was found to be willing to shoulder the burden. An economic firm hired by the government recommended that, in order to increase the number of citizens willing to store the waste, the government should offer an economic incentive. Yet after the government offered to pay roughly $8,000 per citizen, the number of citizens willing to store the nuclear waste dropped to just 25 percent. How are we to explain this phenomenon?

One hypothesis was that the government’s willingness to pay had altered citizens’ assessment of the risk, creating the perception that storing the waste was riskier than initially imagined. This would explain why fewer citizens were willing to store the waste when their willingness was purchased than when it was solicited for free. But a second survey revealed that the perceived risk had stayed about the same. The difference, it turned out, was that the very act of buying the willingness of citizens to store waste had changed the meaning of the act. Citizens reported that when they had volunteered to store the waste for free, they had viewed the act as patriotic, as deeply tied to values associated with service to one’s country. But when the $8,000 incentive was offered, many citizens began to view the act not as patriotic, but as a commodity service. That is, the very act of using market mechanisms to incentivize willingness to store waste had altered the meaning and purpose of the act. The economic incentive, as Sandel puts it, had “crowded out” moral motives. Far from displaying value neutrality, the use of a market mechanism had transmitted a very precise way of valuing the act. Once this shift of meaning and purpose occurred, the question of whether citizens were willing to sell the service at all was opened up in a way that compelled a sizeable portion of citizens to answer no.

These arguments need not be given in any orthodox anticapitalist spirit. There is no question that stable and just societies need to make use of markets in some capacity. But the recognition that economic approaches smuggle in an implicit teleological view—a precise way of valuing the goods being exchanged within markets—forces us to confront directly the question of how we, as a society, believe specific goods should be valued. These arguments do not lead to a rejection of all markets, but rather they demonstrate the need for democratic discussion and collective decision making about the proper role and limits of markets. What sorts of things

There are de facto limits to markets, because there are some things that money cannot buy
should be for sale, and what sorts should not be? We cannot pretend that a market approach is a neutral mechanism for making such decisions. It is not. There is a need, then, to confront directly the absolute unavoidability of, and our subsequent responsibility for, deciding the meaning, purpose, and ways of valuing specific goods. What does this mean for colleges and universities?

**Education as a commodity**

If education is a commodity, it is a peculiar kind of commodity. It is something that too often people are willing to pay for, but perfectly content not to receive. Here, perhaps, the college or university is analogous to the fitness center. The proprietors of fitness centers know quite well that the majority of their customers will not use their facilities in a manner sufficient to achieve the very goal that explains and justifies their existence. In fact, it could be argued that they depend on this gap between the fantasy of their customers and the ultimate reality in order to make decisions about how many machines to allocate, how much space to maintain, how many employees to hire, and so on. In other words, if the number of new customers signing up in January, after the onslaught of New Year’s resolutions, were actually to follow through with their plans, then the fitness center itself would need to be reconfigured in its material practice. But, predictably, this explosion of activity dies down by February, once the abstract desire for fitness meets with the concrete realities of exertion and effort. Effective business management accounts for consumer fantasy.

Maybe instead of demanding an education, students/consumers are really demanding a product that simply provides access to the job market. It is this particular use-value—and not the transformative effects of a liberal education—that many college-goers expect to receive from their educational institutions. In other words, what they are actually paying for is hire learning, not higher learning. And if the central purpose is to gain employment, then education becomes a kind of side effect—a derivative outcome, at best.

In this context, there are quite a few questions that should be raised and debated across higher education. First, do colleges and universities provide “education” as a derivative effect of their students’ quest to gain access to employment? Or is the primary focus on intellectual, moral, and socio-emotional transformation—recognizing, all the while, that although gainful employment is incidental, it is not accidental? Second, is it the case that, despite the fact that employment is by and large the motivating factor for many students, colleges and universities can use this source of motivation as raw psychological material to compel students to engage in transformational practices of education, as distinct from more instrumental practices that lead to credentialing? Third, insofar as students are demanding access to employment, does the college or university experience make these expectations more realistic? Here we must entertain the possibility that the institution is treading on what are ultimately the fantastic expectations of its consumers. Fourth, by the same token, to what extent do colleges and universities knowingly accommodate student/consumer fantasies about both education and employment opportunity in their routine operations? And, relatedly, to what extent do such fantasies determine how much money is allocated for particular programs and services—or for climbing walls, suite-like residential facilities, and the like? Lastly, to what extent does the emphasis on values associated with economic efficiency silently presuppose the idea that the undergraduate education is about hire learning, instead of higher learning?

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

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The state of Maine prints on some of its license plates a compelling epigraph: “The Way Life Should Be.” But just as, even in Maine, life may sometimes fall short of the way it “should be,” most college students’ experiences of higher education currently fall far short of what they “should be.” At present, most students in most institutions of higher learning experience general education programs ill-designed to accomplish their stated purposes and ill-suited to ensure the wide range of learning outcomes that define degrees. Programs in disciplines (i.e., majors) are often complicit. If they fail to foster the learning and skills students achieve through general education, they may undermine what general education should accomplish.

This imperfect reality invites imagination of the way things should be. Throughout higher education, students should approach their college experiences with an informed understanding of the outcomes they should expect to achieve and of the ways in which the undergraduate curriculum—general education in concert with study in one or more major fields—will enable them to achieve those outcomes. Regardless of their family incomes, their personal backgrounds, or their institutions of choice, students should find at every stage of their college careers both ample and all-inclusive support and a commitment to intentionality: the alignment of creative, pragmatic educational paths leading through progressively more challenging study in the humanities, social sciences, arts, and sciences to clearly defined ends. These paths should lead students to graduate on time—confident in the value of their degrees, in the proficiencies they have developed, in their preparedness to contribute to the public interest and to economic competitiveness, and in their potential for further learning.

Closing the gap between the way things are and the way things should be is the goal. . . .

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